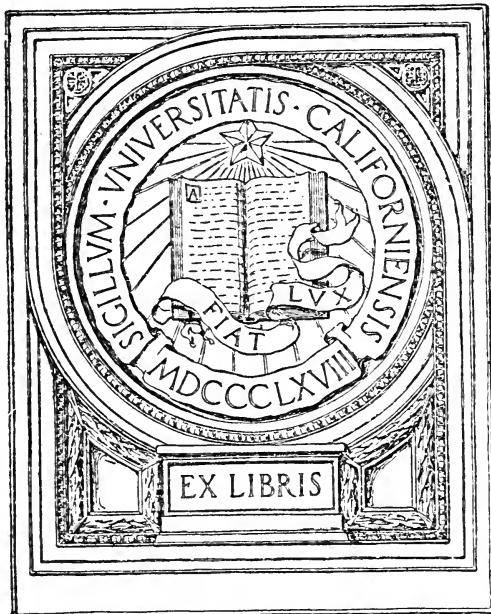


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SARCHEDON

A Legend of the Great Queen.

BY

G. J. WHYTE MELVILLE,

AUTHOR OF 'THE GLADIATORS,' 'HOLMBY HOUSE,' ETC.

IN THREE VOLUMES.

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VOL. II.

ASHTAROTH, QUEEN OF HEAVEN.

‘ From love comes grief, from love comes fear ; he who is
free from love knows neither grief nor fear.’

Bhuddhagosa Proverbs.



SARCHEDON.



CHAPTER I.

WHO IS MY BROTHER?

SARCHEDON, stretched senseless in the desert, bled so freely, that he must have bled to death but for the sand on which he lay. Its fine particles served to stanch the wound ere life was quite extinct; and though very faint and feeble, the mysterious spark was not so wholly quenched but that a tender hand might nurse it into flame once more.

Sadoc and his little band of Israelites, journeying peaceably on, so long as their asses seemed to travel without fatigue, and finding their course through the wilderness by the stars, were about to halt for the night, when they came across the prostrate form of the Assyrian, very white and death-like in the moon-

light, lying near the lion's skeleton in their path. Those were patriarchal times, and it was not the nature of a son of Abraham, witnessing such a calamity, to 'pass by on the other side.' Sadoc was down by the helpless figure in an instant with his hand on its breast, rejoiced to trace the feeble flutterings of its heart. What little skill of surgery he possessed came into practice forthwith. He forced some drops of wine between the clenched teeth; he drew the arrow, and poured oil into the gaping wound; he tore his linen garment into strips for a bandage; and lifting the wounded man on his own beast, walked patiently by its side, until they reached a fitting spot of encampment for the night.

That Sadoc should have been thus journeying in freedom and honour, while his Egyptian fellow-captives were bewailing their bondage in the heart of Babylon, was due to one of those strokes of policy in which Assarac the eunuch took especial pride.

Ever since her subjection under an Eastern people of wandering and warlike habits, counting their possessions by their flocks, but showing rather the rapacious instincts of the wolf than the meek and gentle nature of those creatures they loved to tend, Egypt had learned to hate, even more than she feared,

all races of mankind that lay nearer the land of Morning than herself. She had not long shaken off the loathed supremacy of the Shepherd Kings ere she employed her new-found strength in making war on the nations of her eastern border—the formidable Philistines, the terrible sons of Anak, and the mighty empire of which Nimrod was the founder, ruled in succession by a line of heroic kings. As her victories increased, so she enlarged her territories, until she became powerful enough to contest with her Assyrian rival the supremacy of the Eastern world.

Perhaps that protracted famine, which wasted other countries, and for which the wise and high-minded stranger whom Pharaoh had made his regent provided so skilfully, may have enhanced her relative resources as it weakened her neighbours ; perhaps the balance in which nations are weighed was so adjusted by that Supreme Power, to whom worlds are but as grains of sand, through other means ; but it came to pass that the more Southern and less warlike people contended with varying success against their ancient enemy ; and to proud Assyria the very name of Egypt was as an offence that stunk in her nostrils, a wound that spread and festered in her flesh.

It was a day of triumph, therefore, in great Babylon when her fiery old monarch returned victorious from his Egyptian campaign, and the common multitude rejoiced to tell each other how their hereditary foes had been humbled, how Memphis and Thebes had seen the banners of Ashur flaunting defiance at their gates, his horsemen encompassing their walls ; but wiser heads reflected on the small amount of real gain represented by all this glory, of real damage inflicted on the enemy by an invasion that had obtained no concession of dominion, no increase of national power. What were a few herds of cattle, a drove of captives, a heap or two of gold, garments, armour, and common spoil ? Like the subsiding of their own river, this ebbing wave of war left, perhaps, increased fertility where it had passed, in the stern lessons of experience learned by those who were honourably worsted in hard-won fight. Egypt was little weaker in numerical force than when the Great King entered her territories ; in skill, confidence, and spirit, she was actually stronger than before.

These considerations were not overlooked by the wisdom of Semiramis ; while to Assarac's far-seeing eye, the sapping of Egyptian strength, by every means at home and abroad, seemed the surest and safest

policy for the attainment of his one paramount object—the aggrandisement of his country, and through her supremacy, his own.

It did not escape his penetration, that Assyria's great rival was vexed with a sore at her very heart, to prove a constant drain on her resources, an object of daily anxiety and alarm. By a flagrant breach of faith, an unscrupulous desecration of the rites of hospitality, she had converted a race of exiles into a nation of slaves. Those who came to her for bread had indeed received a stone, and the hand she once stretched to them in friendship was now clenched in menace, or fell heavily in blows of tyranny and oppression. As the Israelites increased in numbers, like certain herbs that spring into growth and vitality more profusely, the more they are trampled under foot, the wiser Pharaohs began to realise the danger they incurred. No state, however powerful, could be safe having a numerous race of aliens mixed, yet not mingling, with its native population, strangers in thought, feelings, usages, above all, in creed and worship. They might be tamed with hard work, disheartened by ill-usage, coerced and kept down in every mode that a remorseless policy could suggest, still nothing less than their absorption or extinction

could give security to their conquerors ; and Providence permitted neither the one nor the other.

They lived, a people apart, dogged, unresisting, suffering with but little complaint, yet preserving, apparently for consolation under the bitterest hardships, some strange confidence in their future, some mysterious trust in a Power before which Pharaoh and his bowmen should be swept away like locusts in an east wind. They worked in sad suggestive silence, they earned their morsel of bread with sweat and blood and tears ; but they had no voluntary dealings with their task-masters—neither ate nor drank with them, married nor gave in marriage, bought nor sold.

Much of this Assarac had already learned from intercourse with the many strangers who crowded to the great mart of Babylon out of the South ; much from his conversation with Sadoc, whom he had liberated, not without a purpose. By the Israelite's narrative, he verified his own information concerning the captive people, and won the other's confidence in his sympathy with their sufferings, his desire to right them by the unanswerable arguments of sword and spear. His plan, he thought, was not unworthy of his own intellect and the glory of the Great Queen.

To send back this venerable Israelite, as an emis-

sary to his countrymen, promising them the powerful aid of Assyria at the time when they should see fit to cast off the Egyptian yoke ; exhorting them to rise unanimously from within, while all the force of Ashur pressed on the enemy from without ; thus to obtain complete conquest, to extend unbounded dominion over the land of the South ; and finally, when the sway of the Great Queen should extend from the sands of the Libyan desert to the farthest mountains of Armenia, to place this strange people in some district suited to their habits, there to become hewers of wood and drawers of water for the Assyrian nation. What matter ? They would have served his purpose, and might be cast aside like a frayed bow-string or the shaft of a broken spear.

But the wily eunuch was perplexed by the coldness with which the Israelite received, while he accepted, these warlike overtures. Sadoc seemed to have but little confidence even in the mighty resources of Assyria ; little faith in chariots of iron, and horsemen countless as the sands by the Red Sea.

‘ Our fathers,’ said he, ‘ came down into Egypt, directed by the finger of our God. When he thinks fit, he will lead us out of the house of our captivity into a land of corn and wine and oil, where we shall

worship him in freedom, teaching our children, and our children's children, that he only is mighty, and that the gods of the nations are in his sight but as chaff winnowed from the threshing-floor, as smoke from a burnt-offering, that melts into empty air.'

Nevertheless, he was satisfied to take with him to his captive people the good tidings of promised assistance at their need, and journeyed back to Egypt, pondering deeply on the prospect of a path to freedom thus opened out by the assurances of a priest of Baal.

It was characteristic of the man and of his national habits, that he refused all guard or escort for his long and toilsome journey. His own servants, taken captive at the same time with himself, and a few asses bearing a slender store of water and provisions, formed the whole troop. Thus scarcely half a score of wayfarers gathered round Sarchedon, to preserve him from a lonely death on the desert sand.

Long days the little company plodded on, taking by choice the most frequented route, in order to avoid those wandering and predatory tribes of the Philistines, whose hand was already against every man, as 'every man's hand was against them.' But the domestic policy of Semiramis had made her name a

terror to these pitiless spoilers; and many a swarthy robber, who would have scorned to quail before the face of Ninus himself, trembled at the ghastly punishments inflicted on his kindred by order of the Great Queen. They believed her—and not entirely without reason—to be omnipotent, omni-present, beautiful as morning, terrible as the lightning, pitiless as fate.

Wide tracts of desert, therefore, stretching between the different wells and stations that enabled travellers to proceed in a direct course to Egypt, though lonely, were as secure as the main streets of Babylon itself, especially since they had been so recently trodden by the returning army of the Great King. Sadoc's only anxiety was the insufficiency of water on their way; his only apprehension, lest his patient should die ere he could bring him into the land of strangers he was forced to call his home.

It was weary work for the sick man in the wilderness, after he had recovered consciousness and began to regain strength day by day. He had never known before with what force that merciless sun could pour down on his face and hands, with what a glare it could be refracted on his aching eyes. How he sickened for the bright translucent waters

of the mirage, though he knew them false and illusive as a dream ! How he loathed the protracted crawl, the unbroken sky-line, the palms that promised rest and refreshment, but seemed never a furlong nearer, as he journeyed sadly on ! The ass's patient step, the monotonous jingle of its bell, the heat, the thirst, the unvarying interminable sea of sand, the longing for something green, were it but a leaf, a blade of grass, a single bulrush, became almost maddening ; and when at noon they halted to fling themselves gladly down in any cubit's-breadth of shade they could find, no palace had ever seemed so commodious, no hangings of silk or velvet so grateful, as the dark lines cast by a clump of slender palm-trees, the protection of some uncovered boulder jutting from the surface to offer repose and shelter—the ' shadow of a great rock in a weary land.'

The Assyrian's constitution, however, was sound, as his frame was strong and agile. Ere he reached the confines of Egypt, his health was reëstablished, he had strength to look his destiny firmly in the face.

The wayfarers rose from their encampment before dawn. With the first streaks of morning the summits of the mighty Pyramids—already time-honoured records of long-past ages and exhausted dynasties

—peered daily above the horizon. Crossing the frontier, Sadoc pointed them out to his companions, while over his usually gentle brow swept an expression of fierce anger and hate.

‘Behold them !’ said he—‘the monuments and the archives of our masters, detailing like a scroll the history of their cruelties, their iniquities, and their oppressions. I tell you, the mortar that daubs them has been tempered with human blood. Every brick is cemented with tears of women and children, every slab founded on the body and bones of a murdered man. I know their cruelties ; for is not my own nation crushed and tortured every hour to complete their like ? I know that the Egyptian is without compunction or remorse ; that in life he would shrink from no crime, as he would accept any privation, but to secure a palace for his resting-place after death. Vain, frivolous, pleasure-seeking, this people—living but for the empty gratification of the hour, jesting, dancing, posture - making, revelling in wine and flowers—can yet erect for the vile body they are so loath to leave tombs that might contain an army, that shall outlast countless generations of their slavish, tyrannous, blood-thirsty, and luxurious race.’

‘ They are skilful warriors,’ answered Sarchedon, whose only experience of the Egyptian was under shield ; ‘ but they cannot stand against the chariots of Assyria. Why do not your people rise and cast off their yoke ?’

The Israelite shook his head.

‘ Who is to lead us ?’ said he, ‘ and whither are we to go ? Shall we take our little ones in our hand, and wander forth to the wilderness without food, without arms, without flocks and herds, skins of water, beasts of burden, and means of daily life ? How shall you conduct a multitude like ours through the desert ? Where shall we encamp at night, and whither bend our steps at dawn ? If we fled to the South, we should arrive at fathomless rivers, impassable mountains, troops of evil spirits and demons, the servants of Seth and Abitur, if, indeed, our taskmasters tell us truth, that the hideous square-eared offspring of the Great Serpent has been expelled to the confines of Ethiopia. Shall we move eastward to be a spoil to the terrible children of Anak and the fierce tribes of Philistia, who live but to slay, ravage, and destroy ? Should we seek the land of our fathers, to find it occupied by your own nation—a race of warriors, men of fierce countenance, worship-

pers of many gods? No, my son, no. While we remain in Egypt, we have bread, though it be moistened with tears; we have safety of life and limb, though we are subject to outrage, insult, and ignominy; we have a home like the weary ox in the stall, and food like the ass at his master's crib.'

'And you can bear it!' exclaimed the fiery Assyrian. 'I had rather go out afoot into the desert to die of hunger and thirst with my bow in my hand!'

'We bear it,' answered the other gravely, 'because of the promise to our father Abraham, in which we believe. We shall *not* bear it a day longer, when the time comes and the man!'

They were approaching a small cavalcade of Egyptians, journeying in an opposite direction. It consisted of a nobleman and his attendants on some party of pleasure or business. The two principal figures were seated in a light fanciful chariot, gaudily painted, drawn by a pair of desert-born steeds, chestnut and gray. Contrary to the custom of the Assyrians, who usually drove at a gallop, these proceeded in an airy, lofty, trotting pace, their heads borne up, their yoke highly ornamented, and their

trappings heavily fringed with scarlet, blue, and gold. In the car sat its lord, accompanied by his charioteer, who held the reins, and attended by some score of servants on foot and horseback—lithe, slender, laughing varlets, fancifully dressed and garlanded with flowers. As this noisy throng approached, the Israelites drew aside to let them pass, halting respectfully, and saluting their present masters with deep humility. The Egyptian lord whirled by with no more notice than a scornful smile; but his people laughed and jeered at the way-worn travellers, mocking their speech and gestures with flippant insolence and scorn.

‘Go to,’ said they, ‘shepherds and sons of shepherds! Go, seek your straw and burn your bricks! So shall ye build houses and tombs for your masters, and temples for your masters’ gods. Shepherds and sons of shepherds, go to!’

Sarchedon’s grasp tightened round the tent-pole he carried in his hand. The fiery temper illness had not subdued would soon have broken in on their mirth; but Sadoc’s restraining touch was on his shoulder, while the Israelite’s grave accents whispered in his ear,

‘And these be our masters. Better, indeed, the

gripe of the demons or the sword of the Anakim. Better, far better, the iron yoke of Assyria than such degradation as this ! How long must we endure—how long ?’





CHAPTER II.

THE HOUSE OF BONDAGE.

ADVANCING into Egypt step by step, the slavery of the captive people became more obvious, the tyranny of their task-masters more offensive. The fierce Assyrian could not patiently brook scoff and insult levelled at his companions; but he controlled himself in deference to the wishes of his preserver, and they reached Sadoc's home without any such overt act of violence as would have brought the whole party into trouble.

It was but a miserable hut of mud and reeds, standing a few leagues without the walls of a city which Sarchedon had heretofore visited as a conqueror—a city of palms and palaces, stately in its long avenues of sphinxes, gaudy in the variegated paintings of its brick-built walls, thronged with a dense po-

pulation, glittering in a profusion of luxury, dedicated to its tutelary deity the Cat.

Somewhat removed from the bounteous river, on the rise and fall of which depended their fertility and even their existence, the adjacent fields were irrigated with all the skill that science and experience could suggest. Their surface—moistened judiciously by canals, ditches, and water-furrows—was alive with a thousand husbandmen. Hoes were plying, buckets swinging, shrill voices rose on the serene air, and lean arms gesticulated with a vehemence ill-proportioned to the amount of labour accomplished or the importance of the subject discussed. All seemed bustle, plenty, and prosperity, save in the huts of these poor Israelites, that stood apart, types of the loathing in which their inhabitants were held by a people with whom, in the days of famine long ago, their fathers had come to dwell.

Lighting down from his beast, Sadoc bade his guest welcome, somewhat mournfully, to so squalid a home. Then turning to the dark-eyed youth who had run out to take the ass's bridle in his hand, he asked eagerly,

‘And the river, my son—how many cubits hath it risen?’

‘Fifteen cubits, O my father!’ replied the other, bowing himself in reverence, and kissing the hem of the old man’s dusty travel-worn skirt.

‘Praise be to our God!’ ejaculated Sadoc; ‘we shall not then suffer famine added to hard labour and heavy blows. And thy mother, thy brethren? Is it well with them? Bid them fetch water for his feet, and a morsel of bread to comfort the heart of this stranger, who hath come to abide within our gates.’

Whatever might have been wanting in luxuries, Sarchedon found amply made up for by the good-will with which his host’s family applied themselves to promote the comfort of their guest. The daughter of the house, a tender little maiden yet far off womanhood, brought water for his feet, and was not to be dissuaded from washing, drying, and chafing them with her own hands. The young men lost no time in choosing from the fold a kid to kill, dress, and set on the table forthwith. Barley-bread was furnished by the mother, with butter, dried locusts, and a piece of wild honey-comb. Fresh water stood to cool in jars of Egyptian earthenware; nor was a skin of good wine wanting to crown the humble meal; for Sadoc was an elder of his people, and a man of mark,

even amongst the haughty conquerors by whom they were oppressed.

When it had somewhat warmed his heart, the old man seemed to brace himself for a confession that had weighed on his mind ever since he lifted the wounded Assyrian on his own beast, and resolved to bring him home with him into the land of his captivity. Filling his guest's cup, he bade him observe the shadows of declining day and the crimson of sunset, tinging the solemn face of a gigantic sphinx in marble, visible from the window of their hut.

‘My son,’ said he, ‘our people will be called to their tasks at dawn. Not a male of the Israelites must be absent, when the servant of Pharaoh beckons with his whip to count us, family by family, and man by man. Our dwellings are searched, our very sick are summoned. There is but one master who claims precedence of the Egyptian, and his name is Death. My son, it is out of my power to conceal you here. Look around, and satisfy yourself. You must cast in your lot with us, as though you belonged to our people; and I will account for you as an Israelite who has made his escape with me from our captivity in Babylon the Great.’

‘I would not willingly bring danger on your

household,' answered Sarchedon, 'but I pray you remember that I am wont to handle bow and spear. My fingers are not skilled to use mattock, hoe, and trowel; my nature, too, does not calmly brook chiding, and refuses altogether to abide blows.'

'It is not for long,' urged Sadoc. 'I beseech you be patient for a little space. The time may come when you shall return to Assyria with the good wishes of a whole nation to speed you on the way.'

'It cannot come too soon,' answered the other, whose heart was with Ishtar, and whose only hope of recovering some traces of her lay in a speedy return to his own country. 'I owe you my life, indeed; and but for you, should have been bleaching in the desert, stripped to the bones by jackal and bird of prey; yet what is life without honour, without liberty, without love?'

'Without faith rather,' said Sadoc, grave, sorrowful, and dignified. 'The only possession the greedy Egyptian cannot ravish, the only jewel Pharaoh's arm is not long enough to seize—too lofty for his reach, too pure for his diadem, too precious for his throne. My son, there is a something even in the weeping captive's breast that may be greater, nobler,

more enduring than the glory of warriors and the pride of kings.'

'There are but two motives,' answered Sarchedon, 'to stir a brave man's heart: the hope of warlike fame, the desire of woman's love.'

Sadoc smiled sadly.

'And when the warrior is down in battle,' he replied, 'or pining in the dungeon—when the woman turns false and cold, or her fair face is fixed in death—what is left then to him whose arm has striven but for his own vain glory, whose worship has turned from the God of his fathers to a creature weaker and lower than himself?'

'A man can always die,' answered the Assyrian, 'when there is nothing left to live for, as he falls asleep when the sun has gone down into the wilderness. How shall you compel *him* who has no fear of death?'

'Death!' repeated Sadoc. 'And is it, then, so much more dreadful to die than to live? Is rest more terrible than labour, fulness than want, peace than strife? Which is nobler, the courage of resistance or of attack? Which best fulfils the purpose of creation?—the ox, plodding obedient to the goad, or the wild ass, spurning control beneath her hoof?'

I will show you to-morrow a whole people displaying such calm and patient fortitude as shames the proudest triumphs of Assyria, with her line of kings from Nimrod the Great down to that fierce old warrior whose chariots rolled here, as it seems, but yesterday over a heap of slain, and whose name to-day bids the false Egyptian tremble and turn pale. My son, the hour may yet come when Pharaoh shall be humbled to the dust, and we shall live like brethren with our kindred once more in the land of Shinar—the land of our fathers, the land of our inheritance, and of our hope. In the mean time, though the night has seemed long and weary, morning may be close at hand.'

With these words, he spread a couch for his guest, and betook himself to slumber. Sarchedon, looking round the hut, remembered it was of such a shelter he had dreamed, sleeping beneath the tower of Belus, in the temple of the Assyrian god.

It was to hard reality, though, that he woke under the gray morning sky. Company by company, as his host had warned him, family by family, and man by man, the Israelites were summoned to their tasks. As he marched to the scene of labour, between two sons of Sadoc, one a tender stripling,

the other a stalwart broad-shouldered youth, shame crimsoned the cheek of the practised warrior, thus to find himself identified with a nation of slaves.

An Egyptian task-master, daintily attired, and mounted on a pure-bred steed of the desert, pranced to and fro, marshalling the band of workmen, threatening, and indeed striking hard with his whip, such as failed to obey his orders, either from weakness of body or inability to comprehend them. The sun was not a palm's-breadth above the horizon ere more than one pair of naked shoulders were already scored with blood. The lash was even raised for an instant over Sarchedon's head, but something in the Assyrian's eye must have altered its direction; for it curled round the massive neck and deep chest of Sadoc's elder son instead, who accepted his stripes with a sullen patience, that denoted some set purpose, some hope of vengeance at no distant date.

'Go to! ye are idle, ye are idle!' was the unceasing reproach of the pitiless Egyptian, while he hurried his gang forward at such a pace as disordered even the light-armed bowmen who formed their guard.

These Sarchedon recognised, by their shields and head-pieces, for a company which had fled before a

handful of his own comrades, at the passage of the Nile by the Great King.

How strangely the past came back to him!—the fierce excitement, the restless variety, of war; the royal signet; the ride through the desert; Ishtar's loving face; and the Great Queen's maddening smile. It seemed impossible that he should be trudging on foot a peasant, a prisoner, a slave. O for an hour of Merodach!—a bowshot's start, with the horse's head turned towards home! He would have time, he thought, for one blow at that painted task-master, and so, hurling him to the dust, swing fairly into the saddle, and away!

He was roused from his dreams by the back of his companion's hand significantly touching his own, while it passed a rope into his grasp; and at the same moment a monotonous chorus broke on his ear, to which, while an Egyptian beat time with his hands, each Israelitish labourer lent as much voice as his lungs could spare from the severity of his toil.

Their day's work was to move a few cubits on its way the colossal image of Pharaoh, cut from a block of granite, destined to form at some future period the ornament of a tomb, grander, costlier, and more spacious than the palace in which he reigned.

Sarchedon, looking upward at the ponderous image, with its long cunning eyes, its grave cruel face, its shapely limbs designed in the harmony of true proportion, could not but admire the resources that had thus hewn a mountain into a statue, and brought it inch by inch over many a weary furlong, to gratify the pride and enhance the glory of a king. Firm, erect, sedentary, its hands spread calmly on its knees, there was something in the very attitude of the giant that suggested power unquestioned, irresponsible, without pity, and without fear.

Levers were employed at every step to raise the weighty mass sufficiently for the insertion of rollers, on which it proceeded wearily, slowly, painfully, yet surely propelled by the efforts of a captive nation, whose straining muscles quivered under the labour, whose blistered hands burned over the cable, whose spirits were broken by slavery, as their backs were torn with stripes, yet whose voices, keeping time with their exertions, swelled a mournful cry in honour of their oppressor :

‘ Work, my brother, rest is nigh—
Pharaoh lives for ever !
Beast and bird of earth and sky,
Things that creep and things that fly—
All must labour, all must die ;
But Pharaoh lives for ever !

Work, my brother, while 'tis day—
Pharaoh lives for ever!
Rivers waste and wane away,
Marble crumbles down like clay,
Nations dwindle to decay;
But Pharaoh lives for ever!

Work!—it is thy mortal doom—
Pharaoh lives for ever!
Shadows passing through the gloom,
Age to age gives place and room,
Kings go down into the tomb;
But Pharaoh lives for ever!

The task-master on his spirited little steed was here, there, everywhere; now giving out the words of the chant, to which, dropping his bridle, he clapped his hands in time; now directing a broken lever to be replaced, the position of a roller altered, a hook secured, a rope greased, or a fainting labourer revived by smart application of the lash. The sun was high, the heat suffocating; even Sarchedon, inured to the toils of war, longed for any catastrophe, however dangerous, that might release him from the insupportable hardships of his task.

The sand became softer, the men more fatigued, the ponderous image rocked, wavered, and stood still. In terror of the lash, a simultaneous effort was made, a cable snapped, and some score of Israelites were hurled panting to the earth.

Amongst them fell the younger son of Sadoc, a weakly stripling, whose labour Sarchedon, working between him and his brother, had endeavoured to spare by his own exertions. When the others scrambled to their feet, this lad lay prostrate, too faint to rise.

The task-master arrived at the scene of disorder almost as quickly as the casualty took place. His eye glared fiercely on the boy's slender shoulders, bare to the waist; his hand went up to strike; but even while the lash whistled round his head, the Egyptian's wrist was clasped by an iron gripe, that shook him in the saddle where he sat. Sarchedon's eye looked very fierce and resolute, his arms seemed powerful enough to have torn the threatening horseman limb from limb.

The latter foamed with rage while he struggled to release himself from the Assyrian's grasp. The Israelites gathered round, the guard of bowmen were fairly shut out by the crowd, a thousand tongues clamoured, a thousand eyes glared vengeance, and the mocking colossus looked down on all that turmoil with its eternal inscrutable smile.

'By the Queen of Heaven, if you move a finger, or speak a syllable, I will strangle you on the spot!'

said Sarchedon, in those low distinct tones men use when they mean to waste little more breath on words.

There was enough similitude in their languages for the Egyptian to understand his meaning; but had it not been so, he could scarce have mistaken the other's attitude and bearing. The oath too, and the man's determined face so close to his own, warned him that this was no Israelitish slave, but one of those formidable enemies from the North, before whom he had seen the choicest of Pharaoh's bowmen turn and flee.

What could it mean? What did this stranger in the land of Egypt, naturalised, as it would seem, amongst her slaves? This was no time to inquire while those slaves crowded round so wildly, as though eager for an outbreak, of which his life would too surely be the prey. Men learned discretion in the service of the Pharaohs, and though he trembled and turned pale, he did not lose his presence of mind.

'Lift the youth from the ground,' said he earnestly, 'and take care of him if you be indeed his brother. Bring here water!' he added, raising his voice—'wine, if you have it. Stand off from him, Israelites, and give him air! Make way, there, for the bowmen to bring him help!'

Thus craftily summoning the guards to his assistance, he extricated himself from the perplexity of his position, and ordering the youth's brother to take him home, excused from farther labour, resumed the direction of affairs; but during the rest of the day blows fell less thickly among the Israelites, and the solemn senseless image made a shorter journey than usual towards its final resting-place.

Returning at nightfall to his hut, Sadoc found it surrounded by a company of bowmen. The tale of bricks his family were required to provide for the king's use had been increased one-tenth, and Sarchedon was to be carried into the presence of Pharaoh without delay.





CHAPTER III.

PHARAOH ON THE THRONE.

To be carried into the presence of Pharaoh!—words of significant import, suggesting speedy condemnation and summary punishment. With arms strapped tight to his body, with feet bound together under his horse's girth, guarded on either side by mounted bowmen, surrounded by scores of their comrades on horseback and on foot, Sarchedon rode slowly on through the night, and at dawn found himself before the portals of a flourishing town dedicated to the worship of Bubastis, as revealed in the outward semblance of the cat.

Here, in one of the noblest cities of his dominion, Pharaoh was administering justice, according to custom. At sunrise the Egyptian king ascended his judgment-seat to dispose without appeal of all cases laid at the royal feet. Therefore had Sarchedon been

conducted hither, through the hours of darkness, to receive the award of his crime.

As they neared their destination, the adjacent country began to teem with life. Cows and oxen, speckled, spotted, and ring-streaked, dragged the plough through a lately-irrigated soil, the former doing their work far more nimbly than their weightier brothers. Playful calves leaped and frisked behind, marked, like their dams, with the brand of their respective owners. Slender husbandmen, naked to the waist, followed in pairs, scattering seed over that rich and generous surface. Scores of birds from the banks of the neighbouring river followed their movements; while a steward or overseer in every field directed the toil of the labourers, taking account of their expenditure and their stores. Peace and plenty seemed to reign throughout the land, and Sarchedon could not but reflect he might be looking his last on a world of light, life, labour, and prosperity.

Unlike his own Assyrian cities, there were no bowmen on these walls, no guard in this capacious gate, through which all seemed free to pass at will. Two gigantic sphinxes, indeed, couched half-a-bowshot apart, kept watch in majestic gravity on either side. Two colossal idols, cat-headed and of compound form,

half man, half monster, faced each other at the entrance; but within, a crowded market, swarming with peasants, glowed in gaudy luscious fragrance of fruit and flowers. A thousand tongues chattered, a thousand arms gesticulated; the ass munched its provender; the sacred stork pushed its long beak at will into woven basket or wicker pannier. . Merry faces and broad smiles gleamed in the morning sun. A burst of cymbals rose in the warm serene air, and Pharaoh went up to his golden judgment-seat, the birthplace of those unanswerable decrees that signified life and death.

As his guards hurried Sarchedon along the streets, much interest and curiosity seemed excited by the personal appearance of the prisoner; while comments flew from lip to lip on his stature, his bearing, and the probable punishment of his crime.

‘Stately as a sycamore,’ said one, apparently a carpenter by trade, ‘and hard as a tamarisk; he will bear impalement as seasoned wood stands soaking, without a warp. If they keep water from him, my friends, we shall find him alive on the fourth day.’

‘Impalement!’ interrupted an old hag, grandmother to the first speaker; ‘Pharaoh will never order such a goodly youth to the stake. No, no. Let him

be carefully disembowelled; give me a measure of myrrh, a pound or two of cassia, and a handful of spice—I wouldn't ask you for cinnamon, oil of cedar, nor palm-wine—and if he look not as tall and comely a thousand years hence as at this moment, may never touch salt or natron, iron probe or linen swaddlers, again.'

'Fie, mother!' said a good-humoured peasant, emptying a basketful of onions and lentils at the feet of a purchaser. 'Pharaoh is merciful, though he lives for ever. The youth may escape with the loss of his shapely nose, or at worst a thousand blows on the soles of his feet. By the talons of our Cat, 'tis a goodly measure of manhood; 'twere pity to make a mummy of it before its time. Why, what hath he done?'

'Ay, what hath he done?' echoed a score of voices, to be answered by a score of extravagant surmises.

He had slain an Israelite! Bah! they would fine him a quarter of wheat, and let him go. He had murdered an Egyptian! It was a hanging matter; but here at Bubastis their dams and banks were raised by working gangs of such criminals. He would escape with hard labour for life. Not much worse than their own peasant lot, after all. Better, for-

sooth, in so far that such miscreants paid no taxes, and Pharaoh found them enough to eat. No, it was a blacker business than this. He had insulted a priest; he had blasphemed Athor; he had put his finger in his mouth to ridicule Horus; he had said openly that Osiris was a falsehood and Isis a harlot; he smote Anubis in the muzzle, mocked with feline sounds the majesty of Bubastis; outrage of outrages, spat on the sacred bull itself! He was a spy, a stranger disguised as an Israelite, a Philistine—nay, a child of Seth, with square ears—a worshipper of Abitur in the mountains, a devil, and a son of devils! Away with him! down with him! slay him! tear him limb from limb!

The wave gathered force as it advanced; the popular indignation swelled into ferocity. Instead of merry good-morrows and happy laughter, the air was filled with yell and shriek and wild revengeful howl. Faces, but now smiling in content, were distorted with brutal hate and cruel lust for blood. The crowd surged and swayed through the marketplace, leaping, bristling, closing in like wolves about their prey. Could they have reached the Assyrian, he must have been torn to pieces ere he lifted a finger in self-defence. But for those whose trade is war there exists

a professional instinct of brotherhood stronger than any prejudices of nationality, any credulity of fanaticism. The bowmen who guarded him recognised in Sarchedon one of their own calling, and made common cause with a warrior, even against their kindred and countrymen vociferating for his blood. With the unerring rapidity of discipline, they formed round their charge in double rank, forcing their way at a steady even tramp through the wavering crowd, and so opening a space on every side, kept it clear by bending their formidable bows.

Advancing thus in a long avenue of colossal sphinxes brightened by the morning sun, they arrived at the entrance of the royal palace. Here, with an infuriated yell, the populace made a final rush; but were beaten back by the archers, at the cost of a few broken heads and bloody faces, though, fortunately for the prisoner, without loss of life or injury to limb.

The judgment-seat of Pharaoh—a throne of solid gold, elevated on twenty-four steps of the same metal above the raised floor on which accusers and accused were stationed face to face—seemed to blaze in a flood of sunlight, that bathed it from the open sky above.

The palace, Sarchedon observed, was built, like those of his own country, round an unroofed court. It differed but little from the dwelling of an Assyrian king in architecture and general plan, but was even more profusely decorated, in a greater variety of sculptures, minutely designed, gaudily-coloured, and representing many of the lowest reptiles and animals with a fidelity not entirely pleasing to the eye.

Here, besides the fox, the jackal, the porcupine, the lizard, the locust, and the asp, were an infinity of compound monsters, the produce of a theology which persisted in embodying every attribute of its ideal under a form, however grotesque, that should give tangible expression to its idolatry. Such were the winged goat, the serpent-headed lion, the griffin with pinions spread and feathered crest striding over its mysterious triad of flowers, the bitch, dragging her homely chain, hanging her heavy teats, canine in all her properties but her sleek bird's head and delicate beak. Things that creep and things that fly, from the stork and the raven, the crocodile and the ichneumon, to the serpent, the beetle, and the bat, filled every interstice on the variegated walls; while between the crowded figures closely-packed hieroglyphics recorded for initiated readers the history, the

nature, and the occult signification of each. Deeds of arms too and field sports, from taking of towns and spearing of the river-horse to numbering of captives and snaring of song-birds, were handed down to future ages in imperishable carving; while, at stately intervals, solemn and majestic, here in the palace of the Pharaohs, towered the statues of those numerous gods in whom Egypt had ever trusted for succour at her need.

Osiris, the great benefactor and founder of their nation, the inventor of agriculture, mechanics, all arts necessary to life; who taught men how to plough the earth and train the vine; who, in his contest with Typhon, the principle of evil, was cut asunder into six-and-twenty pieces; and who, as every true Egyptian firmly believed, would return in his original form at some future epoch to judge and regenerate mankind.

Had not Isis yonder, his wife and sister, collected the fragments of his dismembered body to put together and embalm the whole ere, summoning the high-priest from each of all her temples, she confided to him, and him alone, as she caused him to think, the sacred deposit, so that each carried away what he believed to be the body of his god, under

solemn oath that he would never divulge to living man the place of its sepulture, persuaded that his own temple was the revered and sacred spot? This mighty deity of the future and the past here revealed himself for his worshippers to adore in the massive statue of a bull!

Isis, too, with her ten thousand names, sat in a place of honour over against her lord; and near her Horus, their son, with finger on his lip, emblem of princely modesty and discretion, supported by his half-brother Anubis, the wise and faithful, with human form and a dog's sagacious head. Multiplied too in many a niche and along many a lofty corridor, stood erect and threatening the figure of that deity to whom the city was especially sacred, worshipped under the semblance of a cat. Avenues of cat-headed monsters kept watch in hall and passage; while presiding, as it were, in the very entrance of the court, stood a gigantic image of granite, wearing the short ears of the sacred animal, its sleek round head, and cruel feline smile.

Immediately behind this dazzling throne, constituting it indeed the very tribunal of the Pharaohs, watching, as men believed, over sentence and acquittal, accuser and accused, might be seen the statue of

a female figure, with blinded eyes, serene impassive face, and wings spread out in front, as though grasping and embracing all within their sweep. This was Thmei, emblematic goddess of truth and justice, whose essential attributes were thus typified in her outward form: the blinded eyes signifying her impartiality, the calm visage her indifference to consequences, the wings instead of hands her incorruptible nature, inaccessible to the bribes it was impossible for her to accept.

Standing between his guards, still pinioned and secured, Sarchedon's eye took in all these details of Pharaoh's sumptuous palace ere the glare of burnished gold permitted him to observe the judgment-seat and its occupant. After a time, however, he was able to distinguish the person of a pale slender sallow man, showing like the wick of a lighted candle through a blaze of shining raiment, dazzling jewels, and royal Egyptian state. Pharaoh's attitude was one of extreme exhaustion and fatigue; his face looked very sad and weary, but in its long narrow eyes, low brow, and prominent chin there lurked a strange resemblance to the pitiless features of that colossal figure which was destined hereafter to keep watch over his tomb.

A case had just been disposed of, trifling, indeed, in its details, and scarcely worth the intervention of a monarch; but it was the custom of Egypt, that wherever Pharaoh held his court, he should administer justice in person, from the pilfering of a handful of lentils to desecration of an idol, blasphemy against a god, or resistance to the authority of the king. A dozen strokes of the bastinado had been awarded for the first offence. Sarchedon, accused of the last, was brought forward by the archers, and placed at the lowest step of the throne.

‘Unbind him,’ said Pharaoh, looking round on his men of war with something of scorn. Then, in the prisoner’s own dialect, he addressed him shortly and sternly: ‘You are an Assyrian. What do you here?’

The tone was of one who had never known opposition, and the keen dark eye wandered over Sarchedon from head to foot with something of the cat’s expression, pausing carelessly before she makes up her mind to pounce.

‘My life is in the hand of Pharaoh,’ answered the prisoner. ‘I will not deny my nation nor my name.’

‘What brought you into Egypt?’ continued the

king, still in the same scornful indifferent accents. 'Have you any knowledge of my country and its customs?'

'I came here first as a conqueror,' answered the haughty Assyrian. 'It was not for *us* to learn the manners and customs of the Egyptians, but to impose on them our own.'

The guards, who understood him passably well, exchanged looks of consternation at this imprudent reply; but something like a smile crossed Pharaoh's face, and sinking back into the throne, he observed carelessly,

'Let his accusation be read out.'

It was the law of Egypt that, even in presence of the supreme authority, all judicial proceedings should be reduced to a written statement, comprising the charge, the evidence on both sides, and the defence. It was believed that thus only could be avoided the bias of skilful oratory and impassioned eloquence, where an offender was pleading for his life.

A priest—distinguished by gravity of demeanour and wisdom of aspect no less than by the purity of his linen garments and the reverence he seemed to command from the bystanders—now read from a roll of papyrus the terms of the accusation with which

the prisoner stood charged. It set forth in simple language that 'he, this Assyrian stranger, having come surreptitiously into the land of Egypt, had there consorted, of his own free will, with their slaves the Israelites, tampering with their patriarchs, and inciting that stiff-necked people to revolt; that he had even headed the outbreak of a gang during a temporary respite from their labours—an indulgence, it added, which ought never to have been permitted by the taskmaster; had hurled that functionary from the saddle, and well-nigh slain him while bleeding and helpless on the ground; that such an enormity was in itself an insult to the majesty of the king, an outrage on the Egyptian nation, and a crime only to be expiated by death. He laid his charge at the feet of Pharaoh, who, like Thmei, was the embodiment of truth, justice, and wisdom, and who would live in power and glory for ever.'

From out the blaze of splendour flaming round the throne came again that calm and scornful voice, wearily enunciating the usual formula,

'Produce your witnesses.'

Two or three archers belonging to the force that had guarded the working gang of Israelites here stepped forward, and with them, to the prisoner's

consternation, the younger son of Sadoc—that fragile boy, in whose defence he had brought down the wrath of Egypt on his own head.

The poor youth had been on horseback since nightfall. Unaccustomed, like his nation in general, to the exercise of riding, he was a pitiable object of soreness, fatigue, perplexity, and alarm. The archers gave their evidence clearly enough. It amounted to little more than the bare facts of the case. Then they dragged the young Israelite into the terrible presence of Pharaoh, pale and faint with mortal fear.

‘What needs all this weight of testimony?’ exclaimed the prisoner in a loud bold voice. ‘It is but heaping weariness and vexation on the head of my lord the king. I deny that I have urged a nation to rebel against its rulers. I admit that I opposed by force the violence that would have scourged a helpless child lying in the dust. If this be deadly crime by the laws of Egypt, would that we had given you a milder code when the children of Ashur came of late to seek you with bow and spear. I have spoken. My life is in Pharaoh’s hands. Let him take it how and when he will.’

The king looked round on his captains and counsellors with a passing gleam of animation in his eyes.

‘This is a bold fellow,’ said he. ‘Which of you would dare speak thus, while looking death in the face so close?’

Nobody answered; but a murmur went round the circle, to the effect that ‘Pharaoh lived for ever!’

The king turned to a venerable man who, with the exception of that indispensable official the fan-bearer, stood nearest the throne, and asked him,

‘Have these sons of shepherds been numbered according to the royal decree?’

‘The king hath spoken,’ was the subservient reply, while with a low obeisance a roll of papyrus was laid at the royal feet.

The fan-bearer handed it to his lord, who scanned it with an angry frown.

‘So many!’ muttered Pharaoh; ‘and so poor a tale of work! Increasing, multiplying, swarming over the land, while they lay it waste like locusts! Sleeping more than they labour, devouring more than they produce, hoarding substance, no doubt, and having children at their desire. Is Pharaoh’s arm shortened, or has my hand waxed faint? I must take order with this scum of nations, lest at last

they outnumber us, spreading through the land to eat it away like a sore. I have reached to them the sceptre of my protection; it is time they should feel the edge of my wrath !'

Round the king's neck hung a small image in gold of Thmei, goddess of Truth, corresponding in every respect with the statue that towered above his throne. A similar ornament glittered on the breast of the old man whom he addressed, denoting the regent of his kingdom, a magnate second only in power to Pharaoh himself. When such an official possessed the wisdom and courage to oppose the royal decree, for the king's own welfare and that of his people, his granaries were full, his subjects prospered, and, to use their own expression, 'the land sang for joy.' Too often, however, he was only the echo of his lord.

'The breath of Pharaoh's nostrils shall consume them,' was his answer to the king's outbreak, 'even as the wind sweepeth a plague of locusts into the sea.'

Again the evil smile passed across that weary sallow face. Sensual, selfish, and indolent as was the great ruler of the South, he had yet the political wisdom that foresees a crisis, the subtlety that pre-

vents it, and the resolution that opposes it when it comes. His smile, while it boded no good to the children of Israel, indicated at the same time that he considered his regent an imbecile old man. The facts of the case now laid before him had been detailed to his private ear long before he ascended the judgment-seat, and had been discussed with one of his confidential advisers; a magician of no mean repute, whose keen intellect and scientific knowledge influenced his lord no less than did the startling resources of his art.

This trusted counsellor had pointed out to Pharaoh the impolicy of permitting one of the Assyrian nation to remain amongst a people—situated in their very midst—whose increasing prosperity tyranny and oppression seemed powerless to keep down; and the king recognised in the bold outspoken prisoner now before him such a leader as the Israelites might be glad to obey, should they determine on a general rising to cast off the Egyptian yoke. True, they had neither arms nor horses nor war-chariots of iron; but they were formidable nevertheless in their numbers, their organisation, and their dogged persistence in some strange inscrutable belief. Pharaoh resolved to find out more of this stranger from

the enemy's country ere he let him slip through his grasp either by acquittal or condemnation to death.

Assuming, therefore, an air of rigid impartiality, the king turned to the Israelitish lad, whose terror caused him, as it were, to wither and shrink under the royal eye.

'You have resisted authority,' said Pharaoh, 'and created a tumult; but you are young, and the king is merciful. Take him back to his dwelling-place,' he added sternly to the archers; 'scourge him, and let him go.'

Then, while the lad, more dead than alive—dreading, perhaps, his weary ride homeward fully as much as the subsequent punishment—was led away between two bowmen, the king once more addressed himself to Sarchedon,

'Assyrian,' said he, 'your crime, according to our law, must be punished by impalement. Nevertheless, while I inquire farther into your case, I grant you a few days' respite before you die. Remove him, and put him in safe ward. Pharaoh has spoken.'

The deep response, 'Pharaoh lives for ever!' rose from every quarter of the court, and Sarchedon was

hurried out of the royal presence, even as a ragged old peasant hobbled into it to demand justice on his neighbour, who had robbed him of a string of onions and a half-emptied gourd.





CHAPTER IV.

THE CAPTIVE IN THE DUNGEON.

A CERTAIN rough sympathy for his impending fate seemed elicited from his guards, as they forced Sarchedon through the palace, down a dark passage, bricked and vaulted, that led to some remote place of security, unvisited by the light of day.

‘You should have held your peace, man,’ said one, easing a little the belt that bound the prisoner’s arms. ‘To bandy words with Pharaoh is to throw scalding broth in the air, and stand under where it falls. Had you feigned to be stricken dumb with fear, now, not daring to raise your eyes in the face of my lord the king, you might have escaped with the loss of your nose and tenscore stripes on the soles of your feet. But that long tongue of yours has made it a hanging matter, believe me, no less, if not impalement, which is worse.’

‘Tush, brother!’ interrupted his comrade, a comely archer, not unconscious of his sleek dark locks, marked brows, and other personal advantages; ‘a man can die but once. Better be stuffed and swathed decently in a large cool resting-place, with plenty of room and shade, than limp about in the heat a hideous object, crippled and disfigured for life.’

‘A man can die but once,’ repeated Sarchedon stoutly, repressing the shudder that, in this dark downward passage, chilled him to the bone. ‘I had hoped, however, to fall honourably from my war-chariot in the fore-front of battle, rather than hang by the heels like a trapped jackal, to rot and blacken, till my bones are stripped by the birds of prey.’

‘What matter?’ observed the first speaker, accepting with resignation the misfortunes of another. ‘Men come to the same resting-place, travel the road how they will. Even the Great Sphinxes and the three royal tombs must crumble down at last. It is only Pharaoh who lives for ever.’

Thus speaking, he thrust a bunch of onions and a lump of barley-bread into Sarchedon’s hands, unbinding them at the same moment while dexterously pushing him through a door, which he shut and

bolted on the outside, leaving his own homely meal with the prisoner, whom he thus consigned to solitude and gloom.

The Assyrian listened to the retiring footsteps of his escort as a man hanging over an abyss marks the last strands parting of a rope that links him to life and light of day. When they faded into silence, he seemed to taste already the bitterness of death. Unlike the Egyptian, however, that fatalism which sinks without effort to despair was no part of the Assyrian's character, and he soon roused himself to examine the strength and quality of his prison-house.

It was a cell of liberal dimensions, sunk deep into the earth, bricked throughout and with vaulted roof, admitting a feeble glimmer from one narrow loophole, which communicated with the passage he had left. The more minutely he studied it, the more convinced was he that his dungeon afforded no chance of escape.

He felt the walls on each side, not leaving a single brick untouched; he searched the flooring carefully for some inequality that might give hope of a subterranean passage or concealed egress; but in vain. The work seemed even and level, smooth as granite, and

no more to be tampered with than the pitiless rock itself.

Wearied at length with his exertions, his ride through the night, and the events of the morning, he made up his mind to die, and in the mean time munched his barley-bread and onions ere he laid him down to sleep.

It seemed that he had scarcely rested an hour before the door of his cell was opened, to be shut again ere he could spring to his feet. Food and wine, however, of the best quality had been left for his refreshment, and to these he did justice, notwithstanding the exigencies of his situation and the prospect of a painful death.

So the time dragged wearily on, the faint streak of light that stole into his dungeon affording the prisoner no means of calculating the days as they passed by. His meals, though served regularly, were brought by a shrouded figure that vanished, phantom-like, before he could accost it. No sound from upper earth penetrated these gloomy regions. It seemed to Sarchedon that he was forgotten of men, and, as he somewhat bitterly reflected, deserted by the gods.

Could Baal not see him here, sunk surely but a

fathom deep below the surface—Baal, in whose service he had so often drawn bow and brandished spear? Nor Ashtaroth, lovely Queen of Light, to whom, young, comely, gallant, he had tendered an adoration not unmingled with something of poetry and romance? Nor any of the great Thirteen, wheeling aloft in their golden cars? Nor one amongst the countless host of heaven? Was this the reward they vouchsafed their worshipper? and would that other God, of whom Sadoc spoke, have left him thus to die? He summoned all his manhood, and it failed him; he drew on his courage, and found it but a dogged form of despair. He felt the want of something to lean on, something to trust in, something to help him from without, like a blind man seeking a friendly grasp to guide his steps. He wished he had questioned the Israelite more minutely as to that mysterious creed of his, which taught men they could never be alone nor friendless; that present with them always, but nearest at their greatest need, was a power unseen, unheard, tender, compassionate, yet irresistible and superior to Fate.

Alas, it was too late now! He turned to the wall, with something of hopeless apathy, and fell to thinking of Ishtar, fingering the while that amulet round

his neck which had clung to him through all his troubles, and in which he put some vague superstitious trust.

He felt persuaded it was mysteriously interwoven with his destiny ; and if this charm too had played him false, like all else, it must be time to die, since he was indeed ruined and undone.

Thus pondering, he started fiercely to his feet ; for in an instant the whole cell seemed ablaze with light, not on fire, but glowing in a mild yellow lustre, which faded back to gloom ere his dazzled eyes could distinguish more than the outline of a shrouded figure standing in the midst. Some wild hope shot through his heart that it might be the phantom of his love come to bid him farewell ; but a moment later he remembered his sentence, and prepared to confront a messenger from Pharaoh, sent doubtless for the purpose of leading him forth to die.

‘I am ready,’ said the prisoner sternly. ‘I might strangle you where you stand, before you could summon help ; but what would that avail me ? You are but doing your duty. Lead on. ’Tis almost worth a life to see daylight once more.’

‘Life is dear,’ was the answer, ‘to the reptile in the mud, no less than to the eagle in the sky. It

should be doubly dear to a man of war, who is the bulwark of a host and the favourite of a prince.'

Sarchedon started, and looked piercingly at the speaker, whose voice, calm, low, and grave, seemed not entirely strange to his ear; but the cell had again become so dark, he could make out no more than a cloaked form and closely muffled face.

'What mean you?' said he. 'Did Pharaoh send you here to jest with me before I die?'

'I am indeed sent by Pharaoh,' was the answer; 'Pharaoh, who, through my lore, can read events passing at Nineveh, at Babylon, at Thebes and Memphis, clearly as here in the City of the Cat. Have you never heard, my son, of the magic of the Egyptians?'

'I have *heard* of it,' replied the out-spoken warrior. 'But my experience of your people is at bow-shot distance, and more than once at point of spear. They are skilful marksmen, I tell you fairly, and sturdy men of war enough with push of steel. They needed but little magic to help them when it came to downright blows. Yet we drove them before us, we sons of Ashur, as the lion drives the wild ass across the plain.'

'The wild ass may yet spurn the lion with her

hoof,' answered the other. 'But what are sword and spear and human might to those forces we can summon from the world of spirits at our will? Would you not tremble, my son, to behold Typhon or Abitur of the mountains standing here on the floor between you and me?'

'Seeing is believing,' was the reply of the stout-hearted Assyrian.

'I will not test your courage so far,' said his visitor; 'the more that I know it true as the steel you ought to wear on your thigh even now. Nor would I dare to summon such powerful aid as those I have named except at utmost need, or by the desire of Pharaoh himself. Nevertheless, I will show you here on the spot such manifestations of my power as will put to shame all the lore acquired from your lofty towers or your wide Northern plains. Which of your star-readers will bid this dry rod blossom like the almond-tree, or cause a fresh lotus to spring up in flower from the arid soil of that cemented brickwork beneath our feet?'

While he spoke, the same glow as before, though somewhat milder in lustre, shone through the cell, revealing to the astonished prisoner a slender figure draped up to the keen black eyes, that never seemed

to leave his own. The magician, if such he were, looked imposing neither in gravity of age nor majesty of stature ; yet Sarchedon felt a strange consciousness that he was in the presence of one superior to himself.

He watched with eager curiosity every motion of his visitor.

The latter brought out from beneath his robe a lamp of transparent glass, traced with mystic characters in waving lines of gold, and which shed the radiance that had so startled the Assyrian. Over the lamp he brandished a rod some two cubits long, apparently of polished ebony ; and immediately a cloud of aromatic vapour filled the cell, hiding him for a space from the prisoner's sight. When it cleared away, he reached to Sarchedon the branch of an almond-tree, equal in length to the rod he had carried in his hand, green, full of sap, and fragrant in a rich growth of blossoms bursting into flower.

‘The warrior can take life,’ said he gravely, ‘and the king can level fenced cities with the plain. Is not he greater than king and warrior who can call into existence that which these have only power to destroy ?’

Sarchedon gazed on him in mute astonishment

and awe. That the magician should have thus appeared in a dungeon of which the walls denoted no possibility for secret entrance was of itself surprising enough ; but to inhale its fragrance, and behold in luxuriant blossom that which his own eyes had told him was but now a dry rod of ebony, could only be accounted for by supernatural influences ; and he became a firm believer in magic forthwith. He made a last stand, however, for his incredulity, exclaiming almost unconsciously,

‘ You must have brought it beneath your cloak.’

There was something of the kindly patience with which one instructs a child in the other’s tone, while he replied,

‘ Seeing is indeed believing, as you even now averred. See, then, my son, and believe !’

With that, he cast his mantle from his shoulders, and stood forth erect, letting its folds wind about his feet, and showing in the pure white robe that enveloped his person like a pillar of alabaster on a black pedestal. His features were still shrouded ; but his eyes gleamed with a mocking fire.

Once more, while he passed his hand over the lamp, a cloud obscured the dungeon as before, but for a somewhat longer space. When it cleared away,

he lifted his dark cloak from the floor, and there at the prisoner's very feet, springing, as it seemed, from the hard brickwork, bloomed a fresh lotus, the flower that every son of Ashur deemed specially sacred to his country and his gods.

Sarchedon was a brave man in battle; braver, indeed, than the average of his countrymen, whose courage, perhaps, was their noblest quality. Had a score of Pharaoh's archers been bending bows all round him, he would have died like a lion in their midst, without a sign of weakness or fear; but it was no part of his creed to set at defiance the powers of another world, and he fell prostrate before his visitor in abject humility, covering his face with his hands.





CHAPTER V.

THE WISDOM OF THE EGYPTIANS.

THE magician raised him kindly, tempered to a pale mild light the lamp he had set down, and wrapping his cloak around him as before, fixed his eyes on the prisoner with that calm scrutinising gaze which had dominated the fiery spirit of the warrior from the first.

‘Have no fear,’ said he. ‘I came not hither through the solid earth that I might destroy you, or I had created but now the greedy monster of the river, the deadly serpent of the brake, rather than a fruitful branch from our Egyptian orchards and the sacred flower of your own Assyrian plains. Is it enough ? or shall I show you here in this deep dark cell greater and more terrible examples of my power ?’

‘No more, my lord !’ answered the Assyrian, who felt his courage, though beginning to reassert itself,

unequal to farther trials of a like nature. ‘No more, I entreat you ; for although I fear not mortal enemies, I have no wish to meet the sons of Seth in all the terrors they bring with them from the South ; nor has Baal befriended me so stoutly, that I would trust to his assistance in an encounter with Abitur face to face.’

‘BlaspHEME not Baal!’ was the sarcastic reply. ‘Think you that he can see down into the earth from his seat up yonder amongst the stars, or that he would deign to aid you if he could ? Has he not votaries by tens of thousands in great Babylon, who offer him daily their goods, their blood, their lives ? Has he ever descended to his temple for one of them, or made the least sign that he could taste the savour of their sacrifices, could hear their prayers, take note of their outcries and their wounds ? Will Ashtaroth give you light in your dungeon, Nebo come to release you from captivity, Dagon bring you to eat and drink, or Shamash himself show pity while you are writhing under his very eyes on the stake ? These are your gods, O Assyrian ! And you can venture to compare them with ours—with Thmei, of eternal truth and justice ; with Osiris, benefactor and regenerator of earth and heaven ; with wise Anubis, and subtle

Thoth, and Isis, fertile, lavish, glorious in her ten thousand names !’

‘ There are gods enough in both countries,’ answered Sarchedon ; ‘ and I have heard the Great King swear by them all, that it was strange out of so large a host he had never set eyes on a straggler yet. But I have not heard of Assyrian priest, I tell you frankly, who can claim such dominion over the powers of nature as you showed me even now.’

‘ And you think a man had better force Abitur to do his bidding than implore succour from Baal in vain ?’ said the other, with a sneer.

‘ Why not ?’ was the reply. ‘ I carried a spear already in his royal guard when Semiramis persuaded the Great King to rear an altar for the worship of Abitur in the mountains beyond old Nineveh. It crossed him sore ; for he never endured such ceremonies with patience, complaining that he could feed a score of companies with fewer bullocks than were slain to satisfy one single god. But the queen’s eyes have power in them to draw men whither she will, and Ninus would do her bidding readily as the humblest archer in the host. So we marched up into the mountains at midnight, every man with bow and spear, axe and mattock. Plane, cedar, and broad-

leafed oak fell by scores under so many willing arms, while the stoutest spearmen raised a lofty altar, and dug deep trenches, to carry off the blood, bringing in bullocks and sheep for slaughter, that we had driven up with no small trouble from the plains. Ere long we built up such a fire that the watchmen on the walls of Nineveh proclaimed the mountain was ablaze; and when the burnt-offerings were made ready, there rose such a smoke that the gods could have seen but little of what we, their servants, were about beneath it. Perhaps it was too thick even for him to penetrate, whom we went there to honour. I know the Great King's wrath was kindled; for he caught up spear and shield, bidding the demon come out if he dared, and speak with him face to face.'

'Did Abitur make no sign?' asked the other, with the same covert mockery in his tone.

'There were shrieks heard in the mountain more than once before dawn,' answered Sarchedon; 'but they seemed too shrill and faint for the voice of man or demon. Some of the queen's women, who went up with her, affirmed they were cries of lamentation from those daughters of earth scorched in the olden time by the embraces of the stars, wailing that they could not die till they had touched their spirit-lovers

once again. And the queen inclined to think so too.'

'But you—what did *you* think?' inquired the Egyptian, not repressing a smile.

'I was of the guard,' replied the Assyrian simply; 'and I thought with the Great King that the women in the mountain were fairer and fresher than in the plain; also that our spearmen were ever somewhat hasty and eager with those who would be wooed, before they were won. But we marched down again to Nineveh at sunrise, and for my part, I saw no more of Abitur than I had seen of Baal.'

The other pondered, as if he scarcely listened. Presently he looked up, and asked,

'This queen of yours—is she, then, so beautiful?'

It was a topic on which Sarchedon could be eloquent, even in a dungeon.

'Beautiful!' he repeated. 'In Assyria all our women are beautiful; but by the side of the Great Queen the fairest of them show like pearls against a diamond. You have seen morning rising, serene and radiant out of the east—the brow of Semiramis is purer, calmer, fresher than the dawn. When she turns her eyes on you, it is like the golden lustre of noon-day; and her smile is brighter and more

glorious than sunset in the desert—sweeter, softer, lovelier than the evening breeze amongst the palms. To look on her face unveiled is to be the Great Queen's slave for ever more.'

'You have looked on it more than once it seems, and to some purpose,' was the answer.

'I have seen her in silk and steel,' replied Sarchedon, 'robe and diadem, helmet and war-harness. Deck her how you will, she rivals Ashtaroth, Queen of Heaven, herself. There is not her equal on earth. 'Tis thought, indeed, that she is more than mortal, and will never taste of death.'

'Like Pharaoh,' said the other, laughing outright. 'Nevertheless, if she have many guards stout and devoted as yourself, there can be small risk for that fair body of hers from outward foe. Yet I have heard she mounts a war-chariot and bends a bow with the bravest warriors in your host.'

'I was in Bactria,' answered Sarchedon, 'when the Great Queen surprised ten thousand spearmen of the enemy with the royal guard alone, and a handful of horsemen she had begged of Ninus to bring in corn from the plains the night before. She drove her war-chariot through the thickest of the press, ere we could close in on it, and when we

came up with her, she had but one arrow left in the quiver, while around her lay a circle of slain. Her cheek seemed a little flushed, but the smile was on her lip, and her eyes shone softer, lovelier, kinder than ever. The Great King swore that of all the captains in his host, she was the variest and boldest, but he forbade her sternly such ventures of battle for the future. "How shall I tarry, when my lord is in front?" was her answer, gentle and low as I am speaking to you now. He would have taken her in his arms then and there, before the assembled host. Perhaps he did; but she had scarcely spoken, when the trumpets rang out an alarm that the Bactrians were upon us, and I was down with an arrow through my ribs, almost ere you could have bent a bow. But for Sargon, the royal shield-bearer, who dragged me from under a broken chariot and a dead horse, I had never lifted spear again. The next time I saw the queen she was riding single-handed against a lion, that had slain two of her dogs, and put her people to flight.'

'Single-handed!' exclaimed the Egyptian, 'and against a lion! But you made in to help without delay?'

'You know not our laws of the land of Shinar,'

replied Sarchedon. 'He who draws bow at the royal quarry loses his right hand; he who takes a prey before the prince forfeits his life. I had been safer lying naked under the beast's very jaws than riding in unbidden between the lion and the Great Queen. Yet would I have ventured too, for the sake of her matchless face, but that while I stood watching, she brought her horse within a spear length of the mighty brute, and drove an arrow right through his heart from shoulder to shoulder. I turned rein then; for I knew Semiramis would like well to stand alone over the dead carcase, and jeer at her attendants as they came up.'

'Brave, wise, politic,' observed the Egyptian, 'and yet no doubt a very woman to the core. What think you now? Would she rule prudently over the land of Shinar, if the Great King were gathered to his fathers amongst the stars?'

'No woman may reign over the sons of Ashur,' was the answer. 'We only owe allegiance to a king. It is our privilege and our law.'

'But hath she no favourites, this bold and beautiful archer?' pursued the other, turning his lamp so as to mark every line and shade of the prisoner's countenance. 'None that share her sports and in-

fluence her counsels? The Great King waxes old; does the queen look kindly on *none* of all the fair and noble warriors about the palace or in the host?’

Not a quiver of his eyelid would have escaped the Egyptian’s notice, but Sarchedon’s brow was open and unconcerned, as his tone was loyal, while he replied,

‘I am a prisoner, alone here in a dungeon; you are—what are you? A priest, an enchanter, a magician, backed, for all I can tell, by a company of Pharaoh’s archers and a host of spirits from the Southern mountains. But were you and I standing two naked men in the market-place, that question had been answered with a buffet; were we in harness on the plain, it were well worth push of spear and clash of steel.’

The Egyptian laughed once more—heartily this time, and without disguise.

‘I am your friend,’ said he, ‘and you will not believe it. A powerful friend, too, as I have shown you, and one who, while able to crush you as a man crushes a locust beneath his hand, would yet lend you all the resources of his art for your solace here and your deliverance from captivity hereafter.’

‘You cannot set me free!’ exclaimed Sarchedon,

a delightful hope breaking in to cheer him like the dawn of day.

‘I can foretell the future,’ answered the magician, ‘clearly, certainly, as you can relate the past. Behold this lamp: see, I darken it to a faint pale gleam. Look on it, and tell me what it shows.’

In vain Sarchedon strained his eyes.

‘A line of waving gold within the crystal,’ said he; ‘no more.’

‘Such is the blindness of him whose sight has not been sharpened by learning,’ replied the magician. ‘You are as the rower labouring at the oar, who can but see the ripple he leaves behind, and the banks on the river-side that he has passed. I am the steersman who scans the coming rapids, the rocks in mid-stream, the calm and comely reach of smooth water that sleeps beyond. I look into the crystal, and I behold a youth stretching his arms in freedom, rubbing, with unfettered hands, his eyes dazzled by the light of day. I follow him into the presence of Pharaoh. I behold him on the king’s right hand, clad in a dress of honour, drinking costly wine of the South from a cup of gold. He mounts a goodly steed, he talks joyfully with one of dress and bearing like his own, a troop of the sons of Ashur close

round him, he rides away into the desert, and I see him no more. That youth bears a strange resemblance to him who stands before me now, with clasped hands and wondering eyes, a captive in the strongest dungeon ever built at the command of Pharaoh by a nation of slaves.'

Sarchedon again prostrated himself at his visitor's feet.

'If you tell me true,' he exclaimed, 'I am the faithful servant of my lord for ever more.'

'You will remember me when you are in Babylon,' returned the other. 'You will recall the wisdom and power of the Egyptians. You will tell your countrymen the wonders that I, the least and lowest amongst their wise and great, have shown you without an effort, and you will not forget that I have been your friend, even in your extreme need. Farewell! He who sent me summons me back to his presence, and we shall not meet again!'

Even while he spoke, a thick cloud of aromatic vapour filled the dungeon as before; when it cleared away, the visitor was gone, and Sarchedon, looking blankly about him, began to think he had been the sport of his own fancy, beguiled by the illusions of a dream.



CHAPTER VI.

DELIVERANCE.

HAD his bodily powers been weakened by starvation, his mind, enfeebled in proportion, might, he thought, have played him false. But no; food and wine had been supplied with constant regularity; and testing his faculties in every way he could think of, he found them equal to any effort of observation or reflection he desired to make. Once more he tried the walls of his dungeon, and failed to discover the slightest symptoms of an opening through which the visitor could have passed. This seemed less surprising, as the blossoming of the ebony rod and sudden growth of the lotus in flower denoted supernatural powers, which might well penetrate a cubit of brick-work and a fathom or two of solid earth. These wonders he accepted without question as worked by the spells of that magic lore which could compel the gods

themselves to do its bidding; nor did he see reason to doubt, in his simple credulity, those glimpses of the future which, though sealed to his own eyes, seemed clear as day to his companion.

And that companion—who and what could he be? Sarchedon, whose ideas of a magician were of the vaguest, had yet some indistinct persuasion that such a professor must be old and stately, with long gray beard and thoughtful wrinkled brow. His late visitor, however, could scarcely yet have reached middle life, and on his countenance, so far as he had observed it, was stamped the wary vigilance, the keen foresight, of the man of action, rather than the serene and saddened wisdom that denotes the man of thought. Those eyes, too, haunted him strangely. Where had he seen the piercing gaze, half pitiful, half mocking, that seemed to master a man's inmost feelings, and scorn them while it read? He grew very restless and uneasy now. He paced to and fro in his dungeon, clenching his hands, grinding his teeth, longing with wild feverish desire to breathe the desert air, and strike a blow for liberty in the light of day once more.

He had been calm, quiet, almost resigned when captivity seemed inevitable, and death near at hand.

The time dragged on so, that again he slept, despairing, exhausted, heart-sick with hope deferred. As usual in calamity, the darkest hour was that which brought the dawn.

He was woke by the measured tramp of marching men. The door of his cell opened, and a strong light streamed in, showing the passage outside filled with archers. He drew himself together, like a wolf amongst the hounds, resolved on fighting to the death; but the captain had fallen at his feet, and was pressing the hem of Sarchedon's garment to his lips.

'Let my lord look favourably on his servant,' said the archer, 'whose happy lot it is to conduct him into the presence of Pharaoh, there to be clothed in a dress of honour, and to stand at the right hand of my lord the king.'

Confused, bewildered, all the more that he recalled the magician's words, Sarchedon followed his conductor from the dungeon, gazing about him amongst the guard like a man in a dream. Passing down their ranks, he recognised him who had bestowed on the prisoner his own scanty meal at the cell-door. The Assyrian wrenched from his tunic a golden clasp in the form of a serpent—the only orna-

ment save his mysterious amulet left on his person—and thrust it in the bowman's hand as he went by. The latter kissed it reverently, while he whispered in the next man's ear,

‘A good deed is like a handful of millet cast into the Nile. After many days, lo, the river goes back to its bed, and leaves you a harvest!’

‘True enough,’ replied his comrade. ‘As our proverb runs, “When the waters wane, then sprouts the grain.” But the harvest of thy good deeds, my friend, would be reaped but once in seven years at best.’

‘Silence!’ interrupted his captain; and the archers closing in the rear, escorted Sarchedon ceremoniously to the palace.

Here he was received by sundry officials gorgeously attired, and obviously belonging to the royal household, who vied with each other in rendering him every service that could be offered by inferiors to their lord. They ushered him into a cool and spacious chamber, rich in fantastic decorations, and ornamented with coloured figures of beast, bird, and reptile. Here they stripped and rubbed him with fragrant ointments, conducting him thence to the bath, from which two active Ethiopians extricated

him, grinning from ear to ear as they dried his stalwart frame with the finest cloths, kneading and chafing limbs and joints till his whole person glowed and tingled from the friction. Then they brought him such a dress of honour as might become the favourite of a king; and placing before him roast kid, parched locusts, milk, spices, honey, wine, and fruit from Pharaoh's own table, left him to be served by half a score of such Egyptian officials as waited on the king himself.

Presently the same captain of archers who had brought him from the dungeon appeared at the door of his chamber, prostrating himself with extreme humility ere he ventured to advance.

‘When my lord has eaten and drank,’ said he, ‘and comforted his heart, I am sent to conduct him into the presence of Pharaoh. Thy servant is the bearer of good tidings. Let him find favour in the sight of my lord.’

‘There needs not so much ceremony,’ answered Sarchedon. ‘Are we not warriors both?—enemies yesterday, perhaps enemies to-morrow, in the mean time friends and comrades to-day?’

‘My lord speaks good words to the lowest of his servants, out of the fulness of his own heart. How

shall I answer him whom the king delighteth to honour according to his greatness? What am I but dust beneath the feet of my lord?’

While he spoke thus humbly, it was evident to the Assyrian that his conductor did but veil under this affectation of extreme deference a strong professional jealousy and an intense hatred of race. He recognised in the Egyptian warrior’s dress and harness the distinctive marks of a certain company, celebrated in Pharaoh’s armies for their warlike prowess—a company that the Great King, with a handful of his bodyguard, had driven to the very gates of Memphis, during his last campaign. Its captain would fain have been bending a bow to-day against the Assyrian’s breast, rather than thus humbling himself at every step before a national enemy; but his first duty was to Pharaoh, and Pharaoh had commanded that the prisoner should be brought to him with all the honours of a prince.

They proceeded in silence through the lofty halls and corridors of the palace, traversing that well-remembered court, in which stood the royal judgment-seat—silent and deserted now but for several cats, arching their backs and rubbing their sides against the pedestal of their own especial deity, and a pair

of storks, each standing on one slender leg, with head tucked back and wary eye, in the places of accuser and accused, at the steps of Pharaoh's throne.

'I little thought to have come here again,' said the light-hearted Assyrian, 'save as a doomed man passing naked to the stake ; and, behold, I march by in a dress of honour at the head of a hundred archers. Who shall say what a day may bring forth ?'

The well-drilled features of the Egyptian forced themselves to smile.

'Man is but a vain thing,' he answered sententiously—'a strained shaft, a riven harness, a broken bow ! But the king's hand stretches far and wide. He giveth or taketh away, setteth up or casteth down, and Pharaoh lives for ever !'

The last four words he spoke in a loud voice, falling immediately on his face ; for they were entering the royal banquet-hall, at the extremity of which the king sat in person, under a canopy of state, attended only by his cup-bearer and the official who carried his fan.

A venerable man, whom Sarchedon recognised as having stood at his right hand while the king administered judgment, now stepped forward, and conducted the guest to a place of honour provided for

him, apart from the great lords and captains, who were ranged all down the hall. Passing before the royal table with a low obeisance, the Assyrian could not but be gratified by the reception accorded him: Pharaoh even raised the wine to his lips in acknowledgment of his guest's salute, while in the dark eyes that gleamed over his cup, Sarchedon thought he recognised something of that mocking mirth which had so disturbed him in the magician's gaze, who foretold the term of his captivity. But he was destined to higher honours yet; for no sooner had he taken his seat than a portion of meat and a cup of wine were served him from the king's own table, by no less a person than the old man who had conducted him thither—Phrenes, governor of Egypt, second only in rank and authority to Pharaoh himself.

Adopting a tone of confidential intercourse, as with an equal, this magnate now bade Sarchedon look round amongst these lords and captains for the familiar face of a countryman. Had he not been so accustomed to wonders of late, he could scarcely have believed his eyes when he observed Sethos, gorgeously attired in the Assyrian fashion, seated like himself in a place of honour, and pouring out a drink-offering to the gods of his own land, ere he quenched his

thirst with the choicest wine of Egypt from a cup of gold.

‘He will scarce recognise you in that dress,’ said Phrenes; ‘but it was the command of Pharaoh to make amends for the mishap of your ill-usage and imprisonment, by such honours as are paid to the prince who is next the throne. He must needs be a man of mark at home for whose sake an Assyrian king sends his own cup-bearer with an embassy to Pharaoh.’

‘An embassy to Pharaoh!’ In the last stage of astonishment, Sarchedon could only repeat the other’s words.

‘No less,’ assented Phrenes. ‘And you must not take offence if I tell you it arrived here not a day too soon. Your accusation was a heavy one, and the penalty of your crime was death. These sons of shepherds begin to overrun the land. Some of our wisest counsellors would rejoice to be rid of them once for all; but Pharaoh loves well to see great buildings growing to the skies, cubit by cubit, and day by day. He would not willingly let this people go. Meanwhile they increase and multiply till it seems that ere long they will outnumber their lords. If they had arms, or could use them, it might come

to a bad ending. We keep them down with labour, and tame them with blows ; nevertheless, if a leader should rise up amongst them, they have it in their power to vex us sore. You had not crossed into the dominions of Pharaoh a day ere your person and character were as well known to us as they are now. When it came out that yours was the daring hand which smote the Egyptian, we did you the justice to believe you were a dangerous offender, and condemned you accordingly, even before you were accused.'

'Your opinion of me far exceeded my merits,' answered Sarchedon, who did not fail to perceive he had run a very narrow risk. 'To which of the gods, then, did I owe my unexpected deliverance?'

'Neither to Thmei nor Thoth,' replied Phrenes. 'Justice and policy alike counselled a short examination and a speedy sentence ; but Pharaoh'—here he dropped his voice with an affectation of extreme caution—'Pharaoh, whose wisdom is infallible, determined that you should be kept in safe ward until he had caused you to disclose the inmost secrets of this captive people with whom you had cast in your lot.'

'I could have told him nothing!' exclaimed Sarchedon ; 'nor would I have turned traitor to the hand that succoured me for the half of his kingdom.'

‘It is well, then,’ answered the other calmly, ‘that the question was never asked. It must be a loud shriek to reach upper earth from those dungeons of ours ; and in my opinion, though Pharaoh thinks otherwise, knowledge is bought too dear even from a criminal at the price of torture.’

Sarchedon shuddered. Glancing across the hall at the king’s calm cruel face, he could not help thinking how fruitless would have been an appeal for mercy, how hopeless an attempt at escape. ‘Had you tortured me to death,’ said he, ‘you would have gained nothing for yourselves but shame !’

‘There was fortunately no need,’ replied the other with exceeding courtesy. ‘Ere Pharaoh had leisure to attend to your affairs in person, lo, there comes a cloud of horsemen out of Assyria, bearing rich presents, speaking honeyed words, yet demanding plainly enough that you should be delivered to them unhurt ; threatening vengeance if a single hair of your head had fallen while in our charge. And Ninyas, it seems, is no more to be trifled with than his father.’

‘Ninyas !’ repeated Sarchedon. ‘Doth the Great King then rule no longer in Babylon ?’

‘Have you not heard ?’ replied the other. ‘Ninus has gone to his gods, wherever they may be, and

Ninyas his son reigns in his stead. If the new king's counsellors be like that gaudy youth who hath ridden here on behalf of his lord, sound wisdom must be less sought after than shining raiment about his throne.'

He signed with something of contempt towards Sethos, who had now caught sight of his countryman, and, being well warmed with wine, was showing as much satisfaction as seemed compatible with the dignified presence in which he found himself. The banquet, according to the custom of the Egyptians, was prolonged to a late hour. When the guests could eat and drink no more, singing-women entered the hall, bearing fruit and flowers and golden measures of the rarest wines. These were succeeded by dancers conspicuous for their beauty, and much appreciated by Sethos, who could not refrain from audible comments on their charms. Wrestlers also, and tumblers of the other sex, relieved them at intervals; and if Sarchedon in his heart more admired the upright forms and noble proportions of his countrymen, he could not but admit that the pliancy of limb and supple dexterity of those Egyptians were beyond praise.

The sun had long set, and scores of lamps were

flashing their radiance over the revellers, ere a slow sad dirge swelled through the palace, while an image of Osiris, swathed in mummy-clothes, and stretched corpse-like on a bier, was borne to the feet of Pharaoh himself. Then Phrenes, who, to his weightier avocations, added that of Master of the Feast, raised his hands aloft for silence, and in the hush of voices spoke that solemn warning with which it was the custom of Egypt to close its richest entertainments :

‘What is man? Nothing. What is life? Nothing. What is death? Nothing. For we are born at an adventure; and when we go hence, it will be as though we had never seen the day. Life, though short, is weary; death, though unwelcome, is not to be escaped. Let us, then, enjoy the good things that are present; let us comfort our hearts with wine, and gladden our faces with oil, and crown our locks with flowers: for wine hath lees and oil hath dregs, and ere set of sun the lotus herself shall have faded and passed away. Let none go fasting to his bed, nor joyless to his grave, because in sleep there is neither mirth nor mourning; there is neither good nor evil in the tomb. What is man, then? Nothing. But Pharaoh lives for ever!’

Then the strangers passed once more before the

king, Sethos and Sarchedon receiving each a costly present, the other Assyrians being also gladdened with gifts according to their rank. It would have seemed beneath the dignity of Pharaoh to hold converse with strangers in person; but Phrenes, when he bade them farewell, took occasion to enlarge on the power and riches of his own country, reminding the visitors of its arts, its fertility, its resources in peace and war. Lastly, retaining him for a moment behind his companions, he whispered in Sarchedon's ear,

‘ Forget not how the captive in his dungeon found favour in the sight of my lord the king. He bids you think of Pharaoh when you are exalted in your own country, and, above all, he warns you, despise not the wisdom of the Egyptians.’





CHAPTER VII.

IN THE DESERT.

ONCE more in the saddle, once more in the light of day, once more in the boundless desert, free as the wild ass devouring the plain, the long-winged hawk darting across the sun. Sarchedon set his horse to its speed, and circled round the troop of warriors who accompanied him, in sheer ecstasy of liberty and motion. How could he refrain? Was it not life itself to feel beneath his limbs the old familiar swerve, and swing and long elastic bound? fingering with light and skilful touch the quivering rein, to which every motion answered, like the chord of an instrument responsive to the practised hand of a musician? to borrow from the animal under him, till each quality seemed his own, the speed of a wild deer, the strength of a mountain bull, and the gentle generous

courage peculiar to a good horse alone? Yes, it was worth long days and nights of captivity, of restless slumber and weary waking, of listless apathy and dull sickening despair, to back a steed, wear sword on thigh, and shake a javelin in the pure still air of the wilderness once again. He said as much to Sethos, while they turned in the saddle to look their last on the great pyramids of Egypt, sinking into the plain behind them. The cup-bearer, moderating his companion's pace, like his own, to the springing walk of their pure-bred steeds, expressed, as usual, his earnest desire to behold the walls, pinnacles, and brazen gates of great [Babylon, with her pleasures and her repose.

‘A place, my friend,’ said Sethos, ‘that I was sore afraid you would never see again. A fallen man in the desert is more commonly picked up by jackals than Israelites; and it is not every horse that would take another rider back, as did Merodach, to the very spot where he laid his master on the sand. By the belt of Nimrod, I always said, for camp or march, charge or chase, I have not found such a steed in the Great King's host as the white horse with the wild eye.’

‘Brave Merodach!’ answered Sarchedon; ‘I

would I were across him now. Bold, gentle, and true, I never saw him frightened, and I never felt him tired.'

'He was scared that night, nevertheless,' said Sethos. 'He came by me like a stone out of a sling, even as I reached the middle gate in the southern wall; but the archers on watch turned him back, and when I caught his bridle, he let me lead him through the crowded streets like a dog. By the brows of Ashtaroth, it was a night not to be forgotten in Babylon, while the great tower of Belus has one brick standing on another.'

'Was there a tumult, then?' asked Sarchedon. 'Our countrymen need but little to stir them into action at a festival.'

'Not so much a tumult,' answered the cup-bearer, 'as a great awe and horror over all. The streets were thick with people; but men looked in each other's faces, and scarce dared ask what might come next. Some told me that the skies were raining fire and brimstone on the temple of Baal, and that ere dawn of morning the whole city was to be consumed; some that the Bactrians had vanquished our Great King's host, all scattered about in the plain; that their elephants could be seen from the walls, and

that even now the fiercest of their mountaineers were advancing to the assault.'

Sarchedon laughed.

'Such tidings should have vexed you but little,' said he. 'Did you not remember how we put them to flight by the Red Lake, from which our warriors drank so freely, believing it was wine? I slew three of their slingers at its very brim with my own hand.'

'I remembered nothing,' answered Sethos, 'but that when they drew the sword they smote and spared not, old men and maidens, mothers and children, the warrior in harness, and the wounded at their feet. If the Bactrians were in truth over the wall, I bethought me whether it were not best to leap on Merodach, and gallop back into the desert from whence I came.'

'It was a stout-hearted resolution,' laughed Sarchedon, who knew the cup-bearer's courage to be beyond suspicion, but had not forgotten the disinclination to hard work, hard fare, and hard blows his friend was never ashamed of owning. 'And what prevented this dignified retreat of the Great King's chief officer before an old woman's fable of an impossible attack?'

'Speak not lightly of women, old or young,' re-

turned Sethos. 'If these make love, those make pottage; and thus two of man's chief needs are satisfied. I repeat, I had begun to think gravely of flight, when I met one in the crowd who was neither man nor woman precisely, but a priest of Baal. He told me that his god descended at nightfall in a chariot of fire, and had carried the Great King back with him to the stars. This was the light I saw flaring in the sky over the city, while I approached the gate.'

'I saw it too,' observed Sarchedon. 'When I fell heavily to the ground, there passed before my eyes, as it were, a sheet of flame, and then I remember nothing more, till I found myself on an ass's back, faint and weak, swaying from side to side, but supported by that good old man who picked me off the sand.'

'It was true enough,' continued Sethos, 'though told by a priest. While I was riding about on a fool's errand, uncertain where to turn my bridle, and you were galloping to and fro, with diverse wild purposes I do not yet clearly understand, but which seem to have cost you somewhat dear, our Great King went up into his Talar to pour out a drink-offering to Baal. The god must have been thirsty, since he

came down to wet his beard with wine in person, and Ninus must have been in milder mood than usual to mount the flaming chariot at his desire. Well, the Thirteen have gained a stern comrade, and the land of Shinar has lost the stoutest warrior that ever crossed a steed.'

'We shall see his like no more,' answered the other. 'He was the last of those mighty men begotten by Nimrod to rule over the sons of Ashur with sword and spear. But it is written in the stars that the Great King lives for ever; and though Ninus be gone, doth not Ninyas his son reign in his stead?'

'Doubtless,' was the reply. 'So soon as the father set foot in his flaming chariot, the diadem of Ashur blazed on the son's bright comely brow. By the glory of Shamash, he shone beautiful as morning when he showed himself to the people with the royal circle over his head, the royal sceptre in his hand. There was a something changed in him too; I know not what—a dignity of bearing, a smoothness of gesture, a quiet courtesy to all—and he looked in his dazzling raiment more like a god than a king.'

'Was there, then, no outbreak?' asked Sarchedon. 'Unlike old Nineveh, the people of Babylon

must be reined with the strong hand, in great and sudden changes such as these.'

'With the strong hand!' exclaimed Sethos. 'Why, the spearmen of the queen's host were drawn up in battle array by hundreds at the corner of every street, while bowmen clustered on wall and tower like locusts about a fig-tree. No man dared murmur if he would; and I think none who looked in his fair face could have desired a nobler king than Ninyas.'

'And the queen?' said Sarchedon. 'How fares it with Semiramis in her woe?'

'The queen remains hidden in her palace,' replied his friend; 'not to be seen of men while she makes her moan, rending her garments and scattering ashes on her head. Alas for the pride of her beauty, the pomp and power of her dominion! Surely her glory passed away with the smoke of the great sacrifice. Ninus ruled half the earth with his frown, and she ruled Ninus with her smile. But all is changed now.'

'Has she, then, so little influence over her son?' asked Sarchedon, reining his horse to a halt in his preoccupation, while he pondered on his own future, and how it might be affected by these strange unlooked-for events.

Ninyas, he had reason to believe, loved him but little ; and the queen—he scarcely dared think of the terms on which he stood with the queen. In every direction his path seemed beset with difficulties. But for Ishtar, he could have been satisfied to remain in Egypt for ever, even in the dungeon—Ish-tar, whom perhaps he was never to see again. He recalled the words of the magician ; but their comfort was very vague and hollow, compared with the steadfast belief of Sadoc, whom no troubles seemed to perplex, no anticipations of evil to overcome. He almost envied the carelessness of his light-hearted comrade, who proceeded with his narrative as though it were but the detail of a lion-hunt or a festival.

‘Ninyas seems resolved to reign in person—a great king, not only in name, but in authority, who bears sword as well as sceptre, and tarries longer in the seat of judgment than at the banquet of wine. I could not have believed a man’s nature might be thus changed in the putting on of a tiara. When I prostrated myself in his presence, it seemed as though years had passed since he dismissed me in the desert, and rode back unattended into Babylon. Yet the interval was less than a day. And Merodach : he

sent for the good horse to his royal stables, and caressed him fondly with his own hand.'

'Merodach loves not strangers,' replied Sarchedon. 'But if Ninyas desires him, how shall his servant say him nay? Is not my life in the hands of the Great King? Something warns me, nevertheless, that the horse finds more favour in his sight than the rider.'

'You speak thus in your ignorance,' said Sethos. 'Had he lost the great ruby from the handle of his sword, he could scarce have looked more anxious, more concerned. If you find not that you are first in favour when we return, never believe a king's cup-bearer again. Is it not for this I ride at your right hand so humble even now? Think of us when you come to high honour; but do not forget you owe more to your horse than your friend.'

'I can well believe it,' returned the other, smiling. 'I have always trusted less in the man than the beast. Nevertheless, I am loath to be ungrateful, and will take care to remember both.'

'Had I not been leading Merodach through the streets,' continued Sethos, 'I should not have been seen of Assarac; but the priest, knowing the white horse afar off, bade some archers clear a passage, and

beckoned me to his presence. When he learned all I had to tell, how I had left you but a short space before the horse came flying by me riderless through the desert, he seemed unusually thoughtful and concerned : you know how rarely his face betrays his thoughts, how good or evil seem powerless to affect him, and yet there came a frown on his brow, a wicked fire in his eyes, while he listened to my tale. I could hardly learn whether he was pleased or angered, anxious for your safety or eager to know your fate. He tarried but an instant. Leaders and warriors were thronging round him for orders, and you would have thought him captain of a host setting the battle in array, rather than priest and eunuch preparing a sacrifice for his gods. He seemed calm enough while he gave his directions ; but the same evil look gleamed in his eyes again when he bade me yield up Merodach in charge to his attendants, and return at daybreak to the palace. What more was done in Babylon that night must be related by others ; for I was wearied sore, and when I lay down, without so much as taking off my harness, I slept as sound as all the Pharaohs—who live for ever—in their tombs.’

‘ And with daybreak you learned what had be-

fallen Ninus?' asked Sarchedon. 'Of a truth, my friend, you must have felt that you woke to a new world.'

'Not so,' replied the other. 'In the city, save that the guards had been doubled, all was orderly and unchanged. The prophets of the grove had discontinued their leapings and howlings and brandishing of knives. The priests of Baal were busy cleaning gore and garbage from their temple. In the royal palace I found the old servants of Ninus, with the queen's archers, as usual, keeping their listless watch. When I prostrated myself at the threshold, it seemed as though I must needs fill the king's cup, and give him to drink with the first rays of the morning sun.'

'A good old practice,' observed Sarchedon, 'and, if I know him, not to be discontinued by Ninyas during his reign.'

'You do *not* know him, it seems,' replied the other; 'for I came no nearer his presence than the golden-winged bull in the middle of the Great Court. Here I was stopped by Assarac, who bade me attend the king armed and mounted within an hour at the southern wall. When I tendered the wine-cup, he laughed, and said these old-world practices were to

be discontinued for the future ; but I have no fear I shall lose my office, nevertheless.'

'You are little given to despair,' said his friend ;
'I know that of old.'

'As chance would have it,' resumed Sethos, in perfect good faith, 'I fell in with Kalmim, wearing her garment rent and her hair about her face, but otherwise little vexed with woe ; and she found time to bid me keep heart, for that none of my honours, said she, would be taken away, but rather new rewards added thereto ; and in this she spoke truth, though I scarce believed her at the time, for I thought Ninyas would have done well to place me on his right hand in sight of all the people. So I got to saddle with a heavy heart, and hastened me to the southern wall, where I found the king and but two attendants — mountain-men, well skilled to take a prey. Ninyas rode to and fro amongst the vineyards on Merodach, turning the beast to his hand as though it had borne him ever since it wore a bridle.'

Sarchedon's face fell.

'I shall never ride him again,' said he. 'When a man has once backed a horse like Merodach, he would take him by force from his own brother.'

'Ninyas seemed to love him well,' replied Sethos,

‘ for his palm was never off neck or shoulder, and I swear by Ashur I saw him once press his lips against the horse’s crest. But he seemed strangely hurried and restless, holding little discourse with me, but consulting eagerly the mountain-men who accompanied us. One of these bade me point out the exact spot at which Merodach passed me in his flight, and of this I could make sure because I remembered how a single palm was growing there by a spring. When we reached it, Ninyas laid the rein on Merodach’s neck, and, lo, the horse broke eagerly into a gallop, stretching away over the desert at speed, so that it cost us some trouble to keep him in sight. The king never touched his bridle, but let the beast bear him how and where it would. My horse was already failing under me, when they halted at a spot where lay a splintered arrow and a few large bones picked white and bare. Merodach stood still, snorting and trembling, while the tears fell from the king’s eyes. Then the mountain-men alighted, and showed how a human body had lain here the night before, and how it had been lifted carefully by one whose foot-marks were to be traced, deep and wide, under his burden. Also, how others had gathered round, leading their asses; and even boasted they could distin-

guish the prints of that on which the fallen man had been disposed. "Can you track them?" asked the king in a hoarse whisper; and he promised a reward of camels and oxen, costly raiment, and a talent of gold each, if they could follow up the chase successfully, and return with good tidings of its result.

'The mountain-men earned their wages fairly. It was not long ere they brought back to Babylon such intelligence as seemed to cause the king no little concern and anxiety. But that his royal word was passed, I think Ninyas would have impaled them both, having no better news to tell. They had traced you into Egypt, they said, and had left you lying in prison by the decree of Pharaoh, under sentence of death. I would have given you up, my friend, then; but our young king, it seems, abandons not his servants at their greatest need. He sent for me to the royal palace, and though I entered not his presence, I was received in the outer chamber by Assarac, who clad me in a dress of honour, and threw a chain of gold about my neck. You never saw such workmanship! Had the links been but of bronze, they were so wrought as to be worth a score of camels each. They prate of their gold and silver down yonder,'

added Sethos, with a backward nod, 'but I would defy the whole of Egypt, with all her furnaces, to produce such a chain as that!'

'You were wise not to bring it with you,' observed Sarchedon. 'They are skilful thieves, and would have stolen it from round your very throat while you slept.'

The cupbearer's swarthy cheek reddened.

'I gave it away,' said he, 'for all my haste, ere I laid hand on bridle to ride southward. I know not if 'tis so with *you*, Sarchedon, but I can keep nothing from a woman that she desires of me—not even the secret of my dearest friend. They seem to have some strange power over our wills, like that by which I turn this good horse under me with the rein.'

Sarchedon thought of Ishtar, and held his peace.

'The eunuch's directions,' continued Sethos, 'were brief enough. He wastes few words, you know, when there is need of action. "You will mount at noon," said he, "and ride without delay to the steps of Pharaoh's throne, wherever he may be. You will take valuable presents. Such a troop will accompany you as can protect you from violence or insult. To Pharaoh's own face you will deliver the words of the

Great King, bidding him the salutation of brotherhood and peace, but demanding the body of his Assyrian prisoner alive and unhurt. If he refuse, or if a hair of Sarchedon's head have fallen, you will break your bow asunder, and cast the fragments at his feet, telling him you will return to claim them with an army of the sons of Ashur, to which the last that entered Egypt was but as the lizard in the garden to the mighty monster of the Nile. Be lavish, peremptory, and bold. The king hath spoken." You may believe, my friend, that I turned my head more than once, thinking I might be taking my last look of beautiful Babylon. To beard Pharaoh on his throne with a handful even of the bravest horsemen in Assyria seemed an action savouring little of wisdom or common prudence; but, as the old king used to swear, Nisroch strikes with him who trusts his own right hand. So, when I *did* find myself in Pharaoh's presence, I spoke out as if the hosts of Assyria stood in array a bowshot from my back. Small reason had I to complain of my reception. A king in person could not have been greeted with a nobler welcome. What riches! what luxury! what splendour! I would we had taken their whole country when we fought so hard to cross their river under

the old king's leadership. Pharaoh must have been weakened to some purpose, or he had scarce listened patiently to a demand which seemed wellnigh a defiance. There was delay, indeed, ere they produced you, and I feared for a time you had been slain in one of their secret dungeons; but I took my bow from my back in presence of Phrenes, and made as though I would break it across my knee. The old man turned white with fear, and that very day I beheld you at the banquet of wine, seated in a place of honour and appavelled like a king's son. Then my heart leaped within me; for I knew that we were both safe, and might hope to drink the wine of Damascus within the walls of Babylon once more. I would we had a cup of it now!

Sarchedon was silent. His friend's account of the means by which an imprisonment that seemed so hopeless had been cancelled, a decree of Pharaoh reversed, perplexed him more and more.

That he should have attained thus suddenly to the favour of Ninyas, on accession of the latter to his father's throne, was perhaps to be accounted for by one of those caprices to which he had already seen men owe great honours and promotion under the authority of a despot; but that the king should

have ridden in person to discover his track, should have actually shed tears of pity for his supposed fate, was so strange, that he left to future events the solution of such a riddle, resolving for the present to content himself with the improvement in his prospects, and the hope that, when free and amongst his own countrymen, he might succeed in obtaining some traces of the fate of Ishtar, some clue to the perpetrators of that outrage by which Arbaces lost his life. Deep in his own heart he swore never to rest until he had recovered his lost love and avenged the slaughter of her father—blood for blood.

Thus journeying northward through the plain, at a rate which promised ere many more furlongs were passed to bring them across the confines of Egypt into their own land of Shinar, they observed a cloud of dust rising on the sky-line behind them, and extending so far along the horizon that it threatened to encompass their little troop in its embrace. Swiftly as they travelled, it seemed to advance more swiftly still. The Assyrian horsemen looked in each other's faces with blank dismay, but none liked to be the first in expressing a hideous apprehension that curdled at each man's heart. Nevertheless, reins were instinctively tightened and horses pressed to

increased speed. Presently Sethos laid his hand on his companion's bridle-arm, and pointed ominously to the rear.

‘Behold the red simoon!’ he whispered. ‘The demon of the desert has spread his wings from side to side, and there is no escape. It is the will of Nisroch. When he breathes in our faces, we must die!’





CHAPTER VIII.

A RIDE FOR LIFE.

THE little troop had been picked from the boldest horsemen of Assyria. Not a man but would have spent life freely under the banner of Ashur, and charged home into the host of an enemy, though outnumbered ten to one. Their warlike traditions, their national character, their pride and self-respect, had taught them to shrink from no professional danger, to yield before no living foe; but the bold faces were pale now, and the proud eyes haggard. They rode in wild disorder, as though flying before the shadow of death; while the pure-bred steeds that bore them snorted, and shook their bridles gaily, exulting in the glory of their strength, the easy freedom of their speed.

The simoon, even in its natural terrors, might well be an object of dread to man and beast. No

fate seems much more horrible than to be overwhelmed and drowned in a storm of sand. But the Assyrian had been also taught to regard this danger as a supernatural foe, a gigantic demon of the desert, hidden in lurid clouds, advancing swift, insatiable, portentous, swallowing furlongs at every stride, to seize and stifle him in an inevitable embrace.

Even Sethos caught the infection, and pushed his horse to its speed with reckless energy, panic-stricken as the rest.

Sarchedon could not forbear a laugh.

‘Hold!’ he exclaimed, while he shot with some difficulty to the front, raising his bow horizontally above his head to stop the undisciplined flight. ‘Hold, fools and faint of heart! Can you not turn for one look in your enemy’s face, ere you scour away before him like a herd of frightened deer? Stop, I say; lest I drive an arrow through the foremost of ye, and leave him to be picked clean by the vultures ere the sun goes down!’

‘The simoon!’ gasped the leading horseman, pressing wildly onward without pause.

‘The simoon!’ repeated Sarchedon, seizing the other’s bridle, and thus bringing him to an involuntary halt. ‘Do you call yourself a son of Ashur,

and not know better the arms and apparel of your enemy? Can you see the violet spot that marks the demon's eye, the purple hem that borders his garment, the golden spangles that glitter through his veil? For shame, man! And you, too, Sethos; I could not have believed you would turn and fly, with bow and spear in hand, from a bushel of dust flung up on the wayside!

Thus arguing, storming, and gesticulating, he succeeded in pacifying the terror of his comrades, who consented to halt for a space and breathe their horses, while they scanned the appearance that had given rise to their alarm. The peril, when they examined it more coolly, was none the less threatening that its cause seemed in no way supernatural. The clouds of sand had indeed increased both in extent and volume; but through the folds of that dusky curtain gleamed here and there a sparkle of steel, while at its skirts an opaque winding line denoted to a warrior's eye the approach of a strong body of horse.

The Assyrians became somewhat reassured, though Sethos and Sarchedon looked doubtfully from each other's faces to the advancing host. Already they could distinguish fluttering garments, uplifted spears, and the banners of Egypt waving over all.

‘He has sent to fetch us back!’ exclaimed the cup-bearer. ‘He has repented him of his counsel, and we have not done with Pharaoh yet!’

Sarchedon burst into a mocking laugh.

‘Have they wings like the south wind,’ said he, ‘that they hope to overtake the horses of Assyria in the open desert, with heads turned for home? If, as in good truth it seems, there be too many to fight, let us put on at speed, and the hosts of Pharaoh shall toil after us in vain.’

They galloped on accordingly at a steady even pace, which, while it could be kept up for a considerable distance, gained surely though gradually on their pursuers.

But the desert, flat, open, and boundless as the sea, has also its ports and havens, to which men put in for fresh water and repose, thus diverging from the straight line of their direct course. The Assyrians, therefore, now resuming the shortest way to their own land, found they had described an arc, of which, in order to overtake them, their pursuers needed only to speed along the chord. And thus it fell out that, nearing a range of rocks, one of the few landmarks in the wilderness, they came suddenly on an ambush of Egyptian horsemen, who had

pushed forward to post themselves in that hiding-place.

The little troop now found an enemy in front and rear, the latter overwhelming in numbers, the former too strong for so scanty a force to break through.

They halted, and took counsel, inclining to dash forward in a desperate charge, when an old man rode out from the ranks of their opponents, making signs of parley and peace.

Even a bowshot off they recognised Phrenes. Sarchedon and Sethos advanced therefore to meet him, bidding their comrades remain in the saddle with bows bent, watching every movement of the Egyptians.

The old man broke his spear across, and cast it at their feet in token of amity.

‘Your servant has ridden far and fast,’ said he, ‘to bid you return into Egypt, and look on the light of Pharaoh’s countenance once more. Behold, my lords, these also are your servants, sent to bring you in honour to his palace beyond the Nile.’

‘We have taken our leave of my lord the king,’ returned Sethos courteously, but keeping his horse well in hand under him; ‘Pharaoh has given gifts

to his servants, bidding them depart in peace. Why, then, should we return at an untoward season, to the incumbrance of my lord the king?’

Phrenes cast one glance back amongst his followers, a glance not unobserved by those he addressed, while he replied :

‘What am I, that I should interpret between my lords and the king my master? I pray you, now, return with me of good will. So shall you come to great honour, and sit on thrones in the land of Egypt.’

While he spoke, he edged his horse gradually round, showing no slight skill in the art of managing it, so as to place himself between the Assyrians and their comrades.

‘Not a bowshot will I return,’ answered Sethos, ‘until I have fulfilled mine embassy, and sought in the land of Shinar a new command from the Great King.’

The Egyptians, meanwhile, continued to move their horses imperceptibly nearer the two Assyrians, who were now separated from their companions. The cup-bearer, suspecting treachery, held his bow in readiness with an arrow fitted to the string, while his movements were exactly copied by the Assyrians,

narrowly watching and mistrusting the parley. Sarchedon too grasped a broad-headed javelin, prepared to hurl it at a moment's notice into the ranks of the enemy.

‘I bid you once more in peace,’ said Phrenes, holding up his hand as it seemed for a signal to his followers. ‘If you think to resist the might of Egypt, your blood be on your own head! Pharaoh lives for—’

He never finished the sentence, with the conclusion of which it was doubtless intended that the two isolated horsemen should be surrounded and taken prisoners. The cup-bearer's bowstring rattled even while he spoke, and Phrenes fell heavily to the ground, with a shaft quivering in his heart. At the same moment Sarchedon's weapon transfixed the nearest Egyptian, and a storm of arrows from the Assyrians created no small confusion in the rest of the band. Horses reared, men lost their seats and weapons, shouting, storming, jostling each other, and looking in vain for some one to direct; while the Assyrians turned bridle without delay, to speed over the plain at a pace which put them many an arrow's flight from their enemies ere the latter had sufficiently recovered to form line and bend their bows.

It was a ride for life through the desert. The rest of Pharaoh's army had been advancing rapidly during the parley; their horses were fresher than those they pursued; and it would have been madness for the Assyrians to dream of resisting such a force, if it should succeed in overtaking them. Sarchedon seemed to see the well-remembered gloom of his Egyptian dungeon gathering round him once again. His horse, too, began to fail, labouring to keep up with its companions. Bitterly did he now regret the childish enthusiasm that had tempted him to waste its strength and mettle at the commencement of their journey.

'It is enough,' said he. 'My time is come. I will strive all that one man can to delay a host. Peradventure when they have slain or taken me, they will suffer you to escape unhurt.'

'Not so,' replied Sethos, looking anxiously over his shoulder. 'They gain on us but little. Nay, take heart, my friend; we may baffle them yet. Surely we are in the land of Shinar now. And yonder, by the beard of Nimrod and the beauty of Ashtaroth! I see the City of Towers, and the Silver Lake glittering in the sun!'

'It is but the paradise of the desert,' answered

Sarchedon sadly. 'I have ridden after it many a weary hour, but never reached it yet.'

In spite of the enemy's rapid approach, Sethos reined in his horse, and shaded his brows with his hand, in sore misgiving that he was the dupe of that mirage which is so remarkable an effect of a level surface, a rarified atmosphere, and a dazzling sun. Then he observed with the utmost calmness :

'Lofty palms, and shining pinnacles, and golden waters, all these adorn the paradise of the desert; but who hath yet seen the banner of Ashur floating over its walls? If those be not the towers of Ascalon, may I never drink a cup of Damascus wine, nor drive an arrow through a false Egyptian heart again! We are safe, my friend. Look yonder at that glitter in the sky-line; it is the flash of sunlight on the western sea.'





CHAPTER IX.

THE CITY OF REFUGE.

THE fugitives pressed on apace, Sarchedon's horse, though wavering and exhausted, vindicating nobly the purity of its lineage, a race of which none ever failed to answer the rider's hand and voice, ask what he would; but when they stopped, they fell stone dead. Nevertheless, the foremost Egyptians gained ground too surely, and ere the Assyrians came under the protection of a friendly city, the swiftest of their pursuers had already halted to bend their bows.

A volley of arrows whistled round Sarchedon's head, who arrived last within the welcome shelter of the walls, bristling with bowmen, prepared to defend it against a host. As the great gate closed behind him, he heard the war-cry of Ashur swelling to a shout of triumph; while the baffled Egyptians, making the circuit of the place at a gallop, wheeled round

and withdrew into the desert, as though content to abandon their prey.

‘I never wish to look on Pharaoh’s face again,’ said Sethos, drawing a long breath of relief, while leaping nimbly to the ground, he loosened the girths of his panting steed. ‘I have fronted the Great King in his wrath, and it seemed like passing through a burning fiery furnace, that scorches the beard and blisters the skin ; but under the cold eye of Pharaoh, I could feel the chill of death creeping into the marrow of my bones.’

Sarchedon did not answer. His heart was beating fast, and all the blood in his body seemed surging to his brain ; for amongst the spectators looking down from the house-tops on the entrance of their countrymen, he had caught sight of a veiled figure, that had in it something of her air and gestures who was never absent from his mind—the object of his search, the desire of his life, the woman he had loved and lost.

It was but a momentary glimpse. The figure disappeared almost as soon as seen. Nevertheless, for Sarchedon there was henceforth but one aim, one interest, in the whole city of Ascalon.

His progress through the streets reminded Sethos,

though on a less splendid scale, of the Great King's return after his successful Egyptian campaign, with its greetings, its enthusiasm, its shouts of welcome, and casting down of flowers on the warriors' heads, though the numbers were scanty, compared to the population of imperial Babylon, the height from which the garlands dropped but mean and humble, measured by the pinnacles and terraces that crowned the City of Palaces, throned on her mighty stream.

Long before it could arrive beneath her walls, the watchman at the gate of Ascalon had espied this scanty troop of his countrymen advancing through the desert, pursued by an enemy from that south on which it was his duty to keep a sleepless eye. Ere Sarchedon became satisfied that he was making for a tangible stronghold, and not an illusion of the sandy wilderness, the city had been alarmed, and its Assyrian garrison, tried warriors all, were at their posts. Scores of bowmen therefore lined the streets through which the little party passed. Many a broad hand tendered its grasp of welcome and good-fellowship to the comrade who had baffled yet one more danger, foiled the hated Egyptian with bow and spear yet once again. Agron, the Captain of the Gate, a young warrior in whose company Sethos had often emptied

the wine-cup, spending days and nights of revelry amongst the material joys of his beloved Babylon, himself accompanied them to the stronghold of the city, now brightened by a certain appearance of luxurious indulgence, added to its usual aspect of defence and grim security.

‘Here,’ said Agron, ‘you shall be brought into the royal presence, with the rising of to-morrow’s sun. You shall be sped on your way to Babylon under such a guard as may laugh Pharaoh and all his chariots to scorn, if indeed they dare thus pursue their venture into the land of Shinar. Fear not, my friends; you shall ride out of Ascalon almost as swiftly as you rode in, and I wish it had been the will of Nisroch that I might be permitted to accompany you.’

‘Are you then so weary of the City of Towers?’ asked Sethos, smiling gaily on a group of women who were pelting him with flowers from an upper story. ‘It seems to me that here, as elsewhere, Ashtaroth shines down in light through the eyes of these southern damsels, and that Agron may bask in her beams no less pleasantly than at home.’

‘Ashtaroth!’ repeated the other scornfully, ‘and the City of Towers! Say rather Shamash and the

City of Fire ! Where shall you find a palm's breadth of shade in the whole town at noon, or a green thing within a day's march of the walls ? There was a fountain here over against us when we arrived ; but the sun licked it up ere we saw him rise three times, dry and clean as a dog's red tongue licks a platter. For duty, it is watch and ward day by day, with your headpiece scorching the very hair off your brow, and alarms throughout the night, every time a camel tinkles its bell within or a jackal howls for hunger without. As to pleasure, if you care not to fly your hawks over a plain so barren that the very wormwood refuses to show a twig, or to follow a lion as sulky as yourself for lack of food, who burrows into a cave when you come up with him, you must be content to tie knots in your bowstring, and so keep count of the days of your captivity, as they pass by and bring no change.'

'But you hold a high post,' said Sarchedon absently, for his thoughts were still with the veiled figure that vanished so quickly from his sight. 'You have a noble command, and great honour amongst men.'

'And receive gifts from travellers entering in,' added Sethos. 'Caravans out of Egypt, merchants

from the coast, spoilers of the desert, who must needs replenish quiver and sharpen steel, none can pass through without doing homage to the keeper of the gate, and his hand is never empty whose beard brushes the dust. Tell me, Agron, are there not bales of silk piled in thy dwelling, myrrh, spices, inlaid arms, and talents of gold, ay, and a captive maid or two, fresh and rosy as the dawn on those eastern mountains from which she comes?’

Agron laughed loud.

‘How long would she abide with me at the gate, think you, after the prince had heard of her white skin and ruddy cheeks? No, my friends, wayfarers are driven from our walls as if they brought a pestilence in their very garments. For recompense, I have stern command and scornful look; for food, camel’s flesh and dried locusts; for handmaiden, an Ethiopian wench, black and rough as a goat’s-hair tent; and for drink—well, for drink—you are a king’s cup-bearer, Sethos—I can give you, as you will presently confess, a skin of wine equal to the richest you ever pressed at dawn for thirsty old Ninus. May he live for ever! Hush, man! we are now within the royal gate, and none speaks here above his breath who values the safety of his tongue.’

Thus cautioning his companions, Agron guided them through a massive portal, into the central fortress of Ascalon, constructed to hold a foe at bay even in the last extremity, were the outer walls destroyed, and the town itself razed to the ground.

As a bulwark against Egyptian aggression, and a check to the excesses of those wild tribes that, from the earliest period of history, seem to have made the desert their home, Ascalon had been fortified with all the appliances of defence which the experience of Ninus could suggest; and perhaps, as the birth-place of the queen whom he loved so dearly, had acquired in his eyes a fictitious value that caused him to regard it with jealous and constant supervision. Its central fastness was therefore in proportion to the strength of the whole place, nor did it fail to impress both Sethos and Sarchedon with feelings of awe and wonder, quite incomprehensible to the light-hearted captain of the gate. For Agron, this lowering fortress seemed but a dreary prison, only preferable to the tomb, because of the hope that he might at last resume life and light amidst the luxuries of Babylon the Great. Ascalon, as the queen remembered it, was a glittering city, beautiful in architecture, pleasant with verdant bowers, and ripening

dates, and voice of rushing waters. As Agron found it, shorn of beauty to enhance its strength, it was a grim solemn citadel, denuded of palm and paradise to make room for frowning rampart and threatening tower, drained of its bubbling streams that they might fill its moats and ditches, retaining nothing of its ancient loveliness but the blue sea and the silver lake, that continued to mirror its rugged features in age truly and faithfully as the smiling freshness of its youth.

Making signs to them of silence and discretion, the captain of the gate led his comrades through a succession of massive portals and vaulted passages, to a chamber lined with cedar wood, taken, as it were, out of the wall itself, and lit but sparingly by an aperture communicating with the roof.

‘The prince will not see you,’ said he, ‘because he sits at the banquet of wine, and he holds by our ancient custom of Ashur, which forbids the clashing of cups and counsel; but you are fasting men as yet, and you may see *him*!’

Thus speaking, he drew aside a heavy curtain that had hitherto darkened their hiding-place, and disclosed a sufficiently sumptuous banqueting-hall, in which feasted some twenty or thirty guests, of

whom at least half a score were women, unveiled, with flushed cheeks, disordered raiment, and garlands of flowers clinging to their loosened hair.

Keen as the desert hawk's, Sarchedon's eye took in the gay assemblage at a glance. There was less of disappointment than relief in the deep breath he drew to miss the woman he loved amongst these restless, lavish, and alluring forms.

Ninyas sat in their midst, gorgeously attired as was his wont, with a jewelled drinking-cup in hand, pledging his male guests at the lower end of the board with loud hilarity, or whispering softly in the ear of one of those fairer companions by whom he had surrounded himself. The good humour of princes is contagious. To the royal challenge, men raised their goblets full and set them down empty; to the royal jest, women replied with peals of laughter and protestations of disapproval; while the royal whisper was answered by blush, and smile, and smothered sigh, more flattering than the wildest outbreak of mirth.

‘I told you so,’ said Sethos in his friend's ear. ‘He was anxious about our embassy and could not remain in Babylon, but removed here to be nearer the land of Egypt.’

‘His mind seems easy enough now,’ answered Sarchedon; while Ninyas, taking a lotus-flower from his own garland, and steeping it in wine, twined it through the flowing locks of a free and laughing damsel, leaning across a comrade, till her head almost reclined on the prince’s shoulder.

As she suffered him to fasten the flower in her hair, it was evident to those watching above that she made some vehement though mirthful declaration, accompanied by many gestures of affected reluctance and denial; presently, on a remark of the prince, her retort called forth an overpowering burst of laughter, and Ninyas, taking the collar of gold from his neck, wound it as a bracelet round her arm.

In the mean time goblets had been emptied freely, eyes began to shine, voices to rise, and the confusion of tongues became every moment more and more unintelligible. The captain of the gate, though a stout warrior, possessed, like his two comrades, a leavening of that discretion which, even if laid aside in camp, cannot be dispensed with at court. He judged it time to retire.

‘Those are full men down yonder,’ said he, with a meaning smile, ‘and ye up here are fasting from all but desert air, and mayhap a mouthful or two of

desert sand. Had you taken your places at the banquet amongst the others, with your feet washed, your locks combed, and garlands on your heads, there would have seemed no shame in all this revelry, because you too would have been merry with wine. That which is but decent mirth to one who rises from a feast, looks like rank folly to another who is about to sit down. Let us go hence, and you shall comfort your hearts with bread ere I show you the place of your repose. To-morrow Ninyas will speak with you face to face, in the light of the rising sun.'

He conducted them accordingly to the lodging he himself occupied when not actually on duty at the city gate, placing before them such fare as, notwithstanding his protestations of its unworthiness, was exceedingly acceptable to their sharpened appetites, and producing a measure of Damascus wine, that even Sethos, in his official capacity, pronounced irreproachable. It proved, indeed, of so tempting a quality, that Agron seemed well inclined to let the gate take care of itself, while he assisted his guests in its consumption, expostulating earnestly with Sarchedon on his insensibility to the merits of this matchless vintage—'ripened,' as he boasted, 'in the brightest beams of an Assyrian sun, pressed by the

whitest feet that ever danced under a mountain-maid, stored in royal cellars, and worthy, if ever wine was, to be placed before the cup-bearer of a king.'

Sethos admitted its flavour, comparing it to that with which he had been regaled in Egypt at Pharaoh's own table, not disparagingly, yet so as to enhance in his listeners' esteem his own importance as a man of pleasure, a man of counsel, and a man of action.

'Their feasts,' he observed gravely, 'are spread more fairly than ours, their dishes are more sumptuous, their attendants more numerous. There is not the profusion of fish, flesh, and fowl that we waste in our land of Shinar; but dainties are brought at any cost from the extremities of Libya and the other side of the southern mountains. They would be ashamed to hear the heifer lowing in the court for her calf smoking on the board at which they sit, with knife in hand. Is it not so, Sarchedon? You tarried longer as a guest of Pharaoh than I did myself.'

'My own experience is chiefly of prison fare,' was the answer; 'nevertheless, though the lodging was somewhat straight and gloomy, I can in no wise complain of the food. The bread of my captivity

was meat and wine, not to mention a barley-cake and a bunch of onions thrust into my hand by the archer who led me to my cell.'

'Barley - cake and onions!' exclaimed Agron. 'They fight passing well—I pray you suffer me to fill your cups—passing well, indeed, these nimble friends of ours, for men who fare no better than that!'

'Fight!' repeated Sethos, in high disdain. 'Call you it fighting, forsooth, to set the battle in array, advancing in countless columns with levelled spears and waving banners, only to halt in orderly line, sound a trumpet, and retire discomfited before the sons of Ashur have time to bend their bows? Fight, comrades! I tell you, that for real fighting, man to man, hand to hand, foot to foot, and buckler to buckler, there is but one nation on the face of the earth.'

'And but one champion in that nation,' observed his host, with a covert smile at Sarchedon.

It was not lost on the merry nature of Agron, that his good wine already sang in the brain of the king's cup-bearer.

'You are my friend, and judge me too favourably,' replied the latter, in perfect good faith. 'I am no

boaster, by the quiver of Merodach ! yet I may say, that this belt of mine girdles a man who never shrank from buffets with the Egyptian at a score, ay, a hundred to one ! The sun has scarcely set since the chosen hosts of Pharaoh, his chief captains, his chariots and horsemen, surrounded me in the desert, as—as I surround this goblet in my grasp. Did I yield ? Did I fly ? No. I retired to—to draw them on, as it were, and loosen their array. What ! thou art a warrior—thou knowest my cunning of defence—my skill—’

‘In retreat ?’ asked the other, laughing outright.

Sethos gazed on him angrily, and tried to rise ; but resuming his seat, burst out laughing too.

‘In retreat, in advance,’ said he, ‘in press of battle—when and how you will. They came on at a gallop, with their spears down. I reined-in, and stood like a rock, with my wine-cup—I would say, with my bow—laid across my arm thus. Then I fitted an arrow to the string, and Sarchedon will bear me witness—Is it not so ? Why, where is he ? Surely he was here not a moment ago. Sarchedon, I say, will bear me—’

But turning round for better summons of this additional testimony to his valour, he found himself

so unsteady, that he was fain to give up the search and the subject together, fixing his attention rather on the flagon, which he and his host finished in company ere they sank into a sound and not entirely sober repose.

Sarchedon in the mean time, anxious and sick at heart, had risen from the revel unobserved, and retired to his assigned resting-place, where, notwithstanding the day's exertions, sad thoughts and burning memories banished sleep from his eyelids, peace from his troubled heart.





CHAPTER X.

LOTH.

A LOVER's perceptions are not easily deceived ; neither veil nor mantle can hide that subtle, mysterious idiosyncrasy which makes the one woman, while wholly distinct from the rest, a type and ideal of her sex. It was indeed Ishtar whom Sarchedon had seen amongst the spectators of his entry into Ascalon, nor is it necessary to add that she had recognised him almost ere he passed through the gate. In those long weary days since they parted, how many drink-offerings had she poured out, how many prayers had she offered, to Baal, Nebo, Merodach, all the host of heaven, especially to Ashtaroth, Queen of Love and Light ! Behold them accepted and answered now ! Her lover was in the same town with her ; all the cunning she had practised to keep him at bay whose ardour she so loathed — her assumed fatigue, her feigned sickness, her feminine arts of defence—were to be re-

warded at last. Doubtless she would meet Sarchedon in the streets—on the wall—what matter where?—before another sun had set; and to look in his face, if only once again, would be happiness enough for Ishtar. Her influence over the volatile young prince gave her authority in his household, so that she could roam unquestioned through all parts of the town and fortress where he reigned supreme. Sarchedon, tossing uneasily on his couch, little thought whose hand had trimmed the lamp by his head, strewn the rushes on his floor, and filled with the purest coldest water in Ascalon the pitcher that stood ready to his hand.

During the first watch of night, Ishtar paced to and fro in her own chamber, restless, perturbed, fevered with a wild joy far too keen for happiness, her whole being, sense, heart, and brain, filled with the image of the man she loved. When the archers had been relieved on the wall, and the spearman's echoing tread had died out among the ramparts, a well-known footfall passed along the gallery to her chamber: she recognised, with indescribable fear and loathing, the step of the man who loved *her*!

Ninyas, weary of a banquet too late prolonged, of wine poured out too freely, tresses unbound too readily, smiles lavished ere he provoked them, and fa-

vours offered that he had little inclination to ask, broke up the sitting with less than his usual cordiality, and flung his festive garland under foot with something of the petulance shown by a spoiled child, that destroys its playthings because of the one unattainable gaud it has been forbidden to possess.

His male attendants discreetly emptied their goblets and held their peace; but some of the women showed signs of displeasure and discontent ere they withdrew; Rekamat, indeed, a comely dame from the northern mountains beyond Nineveh, who deemed her own ruddy cheeks and amber hair too rare beauties thus to be wasted in Ascalon, spoke her mind freely enough.

‘My lord is wrath,’ said she, ‘with his handmaidens, because, forsooth, we grudge neither word nor deed, dance nor song, to do him honour. Shall we not rejoice in the light of his countenance, as the golden fruit of the palm deepens under the rays of a southern sun? When the date is ripe, it should be gathered ere it fall.’

‘The dates are musty, and the palm-tree bare,’ answered Ninyas; ‘I am weary of it all!’

‘Let not the anger of my lord be kindled,’ replied Rekamat in a voice that betrayed considerable irrita-

tion, 'while I tell him he is plunging his hand through the thorns to pluck a cluster of wild-grapes ; he is pouring streams of fair water on a growth of bitter wormwood, and yoking a team of oxen to plough the desert sand. O, my lord, have you not free choice among all the birds of heaven ? and cannot you refrain from the poor gray linnet that sits sad and moulting in her cage ?'

'The linnet's plumage is sleek, and her song pleasant to hear,' retorted Ninyas, with a mocking laugh. 'The vulture's neck is bare and peeled, her voice an ugly croak.'

'I thank my lord for the comparison,' replied Rekamat, now quivering with vexation. 'He used not to think so when he hunted the lion under the walls of Nineveh : the vulture had bright eyes and sweet tones when she flapped her wings in Babylon before the Egyptian campaign, and my lord seemed well-pleased to find her hovering over him in Ascalon when he arrived with half-a-score of attendants, and a maiden swaddled up in cere-cloths on a dromedary. O that I had never come here ! never seen this hideous, hot, and hateful town ! never, never, *never* looked on the face of my lord !'

Skilful in the science of such warfare, Rekamat

burst into a storm of sobs, veiling her bright face with her delicate hands, to hide the tears, which were not perhaps forthcoming so freely as she could wish.

It was no part of the prince's nature to soften at sight of a woman's distress, real or simulated. He laughed heartily now, and she turned on him like a tigress.

'My lord has yet to learn the first lessons of manhood!' she exclaimed. 'What do I say? Am I not a fool to look for a warrior's beard on a boy's chin? Out on the smooth cheek and the white skin! Give me the heart, I say. As bright Ashtaroth is my witness, I would I were Prince Ninyas but for a single day!'

She was very handsome with her burning cheeks and flashing eyes. It may be, that all the evil in her listener's disposition woke up at her petulance and audacity; but his countenance remained unmoved, his voice seemed unusually gentle, while he asked, 'Why?'

She looked in his face scared, dominated by the quiet tones that to her feminine apprehension seemed more threatening than the loudest outbreak of wrath.

'Why?' she repeated. 'Because I would cherish

the faithful heart that beats only for me, while the stubborn slave who dared to mock my power should be thrust out with scorn into the wilderness.'

'Have you done?' asked Ninyas, still in the same placid tones, with the same hard unchanging smile.

She fell at his feet now, and her tears began to flow in sad earnest. In her anger, she had been ready enough to run the risk of offending him; but she shrank from paying the penalty.

'I am but as dust in the sight of my lord,' was her reply. 'It is for the prince to command, and for his handmaid to obey.'

'To-morrow, at dawn,' said Ninyas, 'you will sit in the gate of the city, with your garments rent and ashes scattered on your head. In the sight of archers and spearmen, and all the people of Ascalon, you will draw water from the well to wash the feet of Ishtar, as she takes her place of honour, doing homage to the beauty of her who is the chosen of your lord. I have spoken.'

Then he turned coldly away, leaving the prostrate beauty cowed and defeated, though maddened with the bitter prospect of her humiliation.

Notwithstanding his self-assertion, however, Ninyas proceeded on his undertaking with feelings of

considerable annoyance and ill-humour. To be baffled by one woman was bad enough, but to be flouted for his failure by another was irritating in the extreme. He resolved that this trifling must be borne no longer, that the royal favour he offered must be accepted forthwith. What! the girl was in his power, after all! He had not wavered when her father lay slain on his own hearth; why should he hesitate now? She must be taught her lesson, here in this grim lonely fortress, and learn to accept with becoming gratitude the honours thrust upon her by the gods.

Bold, reckless, unfeeling, he possessed the chief elements of success; but he was young, and left out of his calculations the thousand wiles and stratagems through which, in all encounters of their wits, a man is invariably out-manœuvred by a woman.

While he entered her chamber, the girl felt her heart stop beating and her whole frame tremble like a leaf. She dropped her veil, nevertheless, with a steady hand, standing erect, to all appearance calm and motionless as a statue.

A flaring torch of pine-wood, dipped in pitch and fixed in a ring of bronze against the wall, shed its wavering glare on these two comely figures, playing

over the sparkling jewels and festive garments of the one, while it deepened into gloom and mystery the shrouded outline of the other. Costly articles of furniture were scattered about the apartment, such as ivory couches, dressed skins of beasts, silken cushions, and tables of elaborate Egyptian carving. On one of these stood two jewelled cups, and a flagon sparkling with amber wine from the south.

Ninyas paused at the threshold; then advancing on that silent inmate, took her hand, and passed his arm round her waist.

‘I have quitted lighted hall,’ said he, ‘and circling wine-cup, because of the Lily of Ascalon, without whom there seems no savour in the feast, no mirth in the revellers. My lily is drooping here in solitude—lo, I come to transplant her to a fairer garden and a richer soil.’

Quick as thought she flashed one glance into his beautiful face, and made up her mind even while she looked.

‘His servant felt cruelly disappointed that my lord bade her not to the banquet,’ was the deceitful answer. ‘It is to my shame and sorrow, if I have in any way displeased my lord.’

Thus speaking, she disengaged herself gently from

the encircling arm, and fell at his feet in an attitude that expressed the utmost humility, but made it exceedingly difficult for Ninyas to embrace her again.

‘You know,’ said he, ‘that you are always welcome to your prince. Come when she will and how she will, he only desires to lay the lily in his bosom, and place Ishtar beside him on a throne.’

‘Then my lord is no longer wroth with his handmaid,’ said she, unveiling and rising to her feet, while she called into her beautiful eyes a look that thrilled her admirer to the core. ‘I have sat here silent and sad, thinking that the cloud between us was never to pass away. Lo, my lord looks favourably on his servant, and she is glad in the light of his smile once more.’

Rejoiced, no less than surprised, by the happy turn matters seemed to have taken, pluming himself also on his own wisdom in having left her for a space to herself, all the heart Ninyas possessed flew to his lips while he exclaimed :

‘I love you, Ishtar ! love you better than power, riches, a warrior’s fame, a king’s throne, the wine I drink, the very air I breathe ! O, I love you so, my pure and precious pearl, that I sometimes think the pleasure can never pay me for the pain !’

Fickle, self-indulgent, unstable as he was, yet in the fierce impulsive ardour of his youth he meant it—honestly and heartily—for the time.

Ishtar could not repress a sense of triumph in the consciousness of her power—a power that should serve to baffle the gaoler even now, and unlock the prison door.

His eyes followed her with fond glances, while she moved to the table and filled a wine-cup to the brim. It must have been a colder nature than his that could resist the winning grace with which she offered him to drink.

‘My lord will not refuse to pledge his handmaid,’ said she, ‘in token of forgiveness and good-will?’

He emptied the cup at a draught; for indeed to this impulsive young prince there was a keen zest in every phase of luxury and indulgence: the lust of the eye, the pleasures of the senses, feast and frolic, wine and women—he loved them all too well. It was the strongest vintage of the South, and, succeeding his previous potations, its effects were apparent at once. His cheek paled, his glance wandered, there came a thickness in his speech, while he sank among shawls and cushions, inviting Ishtar to sit beside him on the couch. Though it sickened her, she suffered him

to caress her hands, her arms, the fragrant wealth of her flowing hair. Once more she filled for him. Once more he drank to her beauty, her promotion, her coming happiness.

She had ceased to fear him now; for the strong wine, though it blazed in his eyes and inflamed his senses, fastened his limbs, like a chain of iron, to the couch.

Stretching his arms back to embrace her with the caressing gesture of a child, he looked up in her face, betraying even more of mirth than either love or longing in his own.

She watched him, as the physician watches the sick man about to die; and though an icy cold crept over her, she never smiled more sweetly than while she took his beautiful head in her hands and pillowed it on her own beating heart.

In that fair smooth bosom thoughts of agony and horror were lurking, as there are foul monsters and hideous secrets, wrecks and remnants and dead men's bones, hidden beneath the smiling surface of the sea. She longed for the wine to work its office—all the more wildly that he wore a dagger in his girdle—and she prayed with her whole heart she might not be driven to use *that*.

Softly, sweetly, she sang him a drowsy lullaby,
not a quiver on her lip nor tremble in her voice,
while she soothed him with tender care, like a mother
hushing off her child.

‘ Sleep, my love, sleep ; rest, my love, rest ;
Dieth the moan of the wind in the tree,
Foldeth her pinions the bird in her nest,
Sinketh the sun to his bed in the sea.
Sleep, sleep—lull’d on my breast,
Tossing and troubled, and thinking of me.

Hush, my love, hush ; with petals that close,
Bowling and bending their heads to the lea,
Fainteth the lily, and fadeth the rose,
Sighing and sad for desire of the bee.
Hush, hush ; drooping like those,
Weary of waking and watching for me.

Peace, my love, peace ; falleth the night,
Veiling in shadows her glory for thee ;
Eyes may be darken’d, while visions are bright,
Senses be fettered, though fancy is free.
Peace, peace ; slumbering light,
Longing and loving and dreaming of me.’

At last ! He would not wake now till dawn. She kept
her eyes from his dagger, lest she might be tempted
to make too sure ; then disengaged herself with cau-
tious sinuous dexterity from the undisturbed sleeper,
and, slipping the ring off his finger, stole noiseless
as a shadow from the place.



CHAPTER XI.

WILLING.

HURRYING through the corridors of the fortress, she passed the chamber where Sethos and Agron, who had assiduously emptied their flagon, were sleeping that sound and dreamless sleep, from which men are with difficulty aroused until the draughts they have swallowed cease to affect the brain.

Neither had taken much thought in bestowing himself decently to rest. The cup-bearer, stretched on the floor, still grasped a goblet in his hand ; while the captain of the gate, retaining, as it seemed, some vague consciousness that his duties demanded unceasing vigilance, remained seated at the table, his head pillowed on his arms, his whole faculties so steeped in slumber that an enemy might have stormed the walls and penetrated to the heart of the fortress, yet scarcely disturbed his repose.

With womanly foresight and precaution, Ishtar snatched a loaf of bread and a handful of dates from the board, lifted mantle, bow and quiver from the corner where these had been flung aside, and went her way.

Sarchedon, tossing restlessly on his couch, courted sleep in vain. To no purpose had he quaffed draughts of pure cold water, extinguished his torch, and resolved to force his faculties into repose.

The veiled figure he had seen on entering the gate thrust itself on his senses. It might have been—it must have been—Ishtar! She was in the same town, perhaps under the same roof. And if so, what had been her fate since they parted? How came she in Ascalon, but by a violence and treachery that could only have the basest object, the cruellest results. Each after each, these maddening thoughts seemed to goad and sicken him like successive stabs, when their current was suddenly arrested by a light step on his chamber-floor, the faint rustle of a garment at his side.

Starting to his feet with an exclamation of defiance, it was smothered ere spoken by a soft hand laid to his lips, while the dear familiar voice murmured in his ear,

‘Sarchedon my beloved, it is I—your own Ishtar. Hush, for your life! Be silent, be obedient, and follow me.’

Was he dreaming? Was he in his right senses? This, at least, could be no illusion of fancy. The glowing form panted in his arms, the sweet lips were glued to his own. Even in that crisis of danger and suspense she could spare him a moment of rapture, in her clinging close embrace. If these were dreams—he prayed to Ashtaroth—let him never wake again!

But despite of, perhaps because of, her affection, the woman retained all her faculties, her common sense and presence of mind, while the man was lost and bewildered in the tumult of his unexpected happiness. She girded the sword on his thigh with her own hands, buckled Agron’s bow and quiver at his back, whispered caution once more, and so led him through gloomy passage and vaulted archway to the outer court.

Here the starlight showed him the loving eyes, the fair fond face, he had thought never to see again but in his dreams. Looking down on that pure open brow, angry suspicions, hideous misgivings fled from his troubled spirit, as evil dreams and phantoms of the night vanish with dawn of day.

‘I am happy now,’ she murmured, ‘and I am safe. To-morrow it would have been too late!’

But for this timely avowal, he might have urged her with a thousand ill-advised questions, productive only of delay. Now he pressed the hand that guided him gratefully to his lips, and she knew that he thanked her from his inmost heart.

‘We have not a moment to lose,’ she whispered, as they made for one corner of the court, where a continuous chewing of provender, and an indistinct mass topped by two or three swan-like necks and motionless heads, denoted that certain camels were at rest. ‘By to-morrow’s dawn we must be many leagues from Ascalon, and it is now the middle watch of night. The dromedary that brought me here is the fleetest in all the land of Shinar. He laughs at the wild ass, and scorns the desert wind in its wrath. Sarchedon my beloved, if you and I were mounted on him, a single bowshot outside the gate, we should be safe!’

‘They have fleet steeds,’ he answered, thinking of Merodach, and wishing the good horse stood ready saddled for him now.

‘Steeds!’ she repeated. ‘The fleetest that ever spurned sand would labour, after that ill-favoured

beast, like gorged vultures after the long-winged hawk of the desert. Rouse him, Sarchedon, and fasten our provender to his side. Beware! he is surly and savage; but he can travel far and fast, untiring as a ship on the sea, swift as a bird in the air.'

Thus speaking she helped him to secure the trappings of the unwilling dromedary, disturbed from its repose, not without many angry protestations, couched in discordant screams and fierce attempts to bite. It was not long ere he had mounted and placed her behind him on the creature's back, which then rose slowly to its knees and feet, stretched its long neck with an inquiring gesture into the darkness, blew the dust out of its nostrils, and shuffled with awkward sidelong gait into the town.

Those soft spongy feet roused no echo in the streets. The dromedary passed on under its burden, like an ungainly ghost, without disturbing spearman in the fortress or archer on the wall.

When the gate was reached, however, the fugitives found it too well guarded. In Agron's absence, his subordinate was prepared to be unusually vigilant and alert.

The watchman challenged from the rampart, the

archers mustered by scores, bending their bows; a single torch shed its light on the officer's warlike face and weapons, the clamps of the ponderous doors, Sarchedon's bow and quiver, the dromedary's sullen head, and the feet and hands of Ishtar, as she sat exalted over all.

'None can pass out after nightfall,' said the officer, levelling his spear. 'Turn back your beast, and go your way. You can come hither again at dawn.'

Sarchedon felt the hand of Ishtar press his shoulder as though to inculcate silence and caution. Trusting to her resources he held his peace.

'Where is the captain of the gate?' said she, in a tone of anger deep and imperious as a man's. 'I demand to see Agron; we do not speak with a common spearman of matters pertaining to the Great King.'

His instincts of discipline bade him screen his commander, while he obeyed an appearance of authority so well sustained.

'Let not my lord be wroth,' said he, peering up into the darkness, in hope of recognising the high official with whom he spoke. 'The captain of the gate is even now visiting his watchmen on the wall.'

At his return he will doubtless give my lord liberty to pass out. In the mean time the royal orders are strict. May the King live for ever !'

Whispering to an archer, he bade him run with all speed and apprise Agron of the difficulty, but showed no disposition to relax his own vigilance at the gate.

'Fool !' exclaimed Ishtar, in the same deep tones. 'Will you wear your head to-morrow at sunrise ? or do you wish it set here over the gate, while your body is flung from the wall to make a morning meal for the jackals ? Know you not this token ? Do you dare disavow the signet of Ninyas in his own royal abode ?'

She held out the ring stripped from the Prince's finger in his drunken sleep, and was not surprised to see the Assyrian officer prostrate himself humbly before the jewel. He thought the manner of its forthcoming unaccountable and irregular, the hand that tendered it strangely white and delicate ; but that was no affair of his. The Prince's signet, here in Ascalon, conferred supreme authority on its bearer, and he must simply obey.

He lowered his spear ; the archers unstrung their bows ; the heavy gate swung back ; the dromedary

paced leisurely through ; and Sarchedon was alone with Ishtar in the desert, free !

They made but little haste while within bow-shot of the walls. To arouse suspicion would have been fatal. The stars gave light enough for a practised archer to make sure of his mark. But when they had traversed a few furlongs, Sarchedon could not resist a smothered cry of triumph, while he urged the dromedary to its speed. The air from the sea blew fresh and pleasant, lifting his locks and cooling his temples as he hurried on, while every sense seemed sharpened, every muscle strengthened by the rapidity of his flight. Behind him was sorrow, outrage, and imprisonment ; before him freedom, love, and joy. He could scarce control his feelings ; for was not Ishtar leaning on his shoulder ? and had he not gained all he desired in the world ?

Looking back in the beloved face of her who was to share his future, it startled him to see it so pale, that in the starlight it was like the face of a corpse.

She had borne up bravely through difficulty and danger ; but when the crisis was past, and she knew her lover in safety, the strength that self-sacrifice and devotion afford a woman at her need failed her

without warning ; and she sank heavily against Sarchedon, faint, helpless, inanimate, but clinging round him to the last.

So the stars paled, the sky brightened, turning to pearly gray, and clear faint green, primrose, orange, crimson, and molten gold. The sun rose in his glory, bathing earth and heaven in floods of dazzling light. The sand glowed, the waste widened, and still the dromedary travelled on with free unfaltering strides, swift, straight, and noiseless like an arrow from a bow.

Ninyas, waking out of his heavy slumbers, looked about him in a dim confusion of thoughts that gradually resolved themselves to a sense of irritation tinged with shame.

The voice of Ishtar still seemed ringing in his ears, signs of her presence—jewels, garments, articles of feminine luxury—were strewn about the apartment ; but she who made the charm of all was nowhere to be found. He called, he clapped his hands, he rose, yawned, stretched himself, and observing his finger bared of its accustomed jewel, the whole truth flashed on him at a glance.

He actually trembled with rage and self-contempt. To have been put off so long, and thus outwitted at

last! He could have inflicted on her the severest punishment in all the code of Assyrian cruelty, and laughed her to scorn the while, had she been within reach. His perceptions, especially where self was concerned, were vivid enough; and the loss of his signet showed him too clearly that not only had the bird escaped from his hand, but that she was beyond the walls ere now, flown out of reach for evermore.

He had as yet vouchsafed no audience to the fugitives from Egypt, and had indeed taken little notice of their arrival, reported during his protracted carouse; so he was ignorant that Sarchedon had been his guest for a night, and thus repaid his hospitality. It was maddening enough, however, without this aggravation, to reflect that the woman he proposed so to honour, should have preferred to his royal favour the danger and hardships of a sudden flight into the wilderness. Ninyas felt he must avenge himself on anything and everything that came to hand.

The captain of the gate was obviously the first person to be interrogated, brow-beaten, and disgraced.

Agron, collecting his faculties after his debauch, and learning with some anxiety from the report of his subordinate, that the gate had been opened by

royal order before the morning watch, was in nowise reassured when he received a summons to attend the Prince forthwith. Bold as he had proved himself many a day in battle, his cheek paled, and his fingers trembled, so that he could hardly draw the buckle of his girdle, or straighten the quiver at his back.

Ninyas had bathed his temples, combed out his abundant locks, and adjusted his apparel. Not a trace of his late excess was perceptible save a slight flush, which perhaps rather enhanced the beauty of his delicate cheek; and only those who knew him well could have detected in the mocking calm of that fair womanly face signs of a storm that would burst anon.

Agron, however, while he prostrated himself before his lord, felt that he was a doomed man.

‘I missed you from the banquet yesterday,’ said Ninyas, with exceeding graciousness; ‘was it that my trusty captain remained to handle bow and spear at the gate, rather than wine-cup at the board?’

‘The Prince hath spoken,’ answered Agron, steadying his voice by an effort.

‘Not a mouse could have crept through, then, without your sanction,’ continued his lord. ‘O, I know your vigilance, and shall reward it richly as it deserves.’

Agron could but listen and tremble.

‘The fleetest dromedary in the land of Shinar was tethered in the court of the fortress when the sun set yesterday. I have heard it passed out of Ascalon, bearing a double burden, before the morning watch. Are these things so?’

It was obvious that the Prince had already made himself acquainted with the truth. Agron only faltered out,

‘The rider bore the royal signet. What am I, that I should canvass the commands of my lord?’

The voice of Ninyas grew softer, his manner more gentle every moment.

‘You are an Assyrian captain,’ said he, ‘a trained man of war from your youth. Rehearse me, lest I forget them, your duties as chief watchman at the gate.’

Agron felt that the shadow of death was overtaking him fast, while he replied,

‘Thy servant quits not his post on any pretence until relieved, but at the express command of my lord. He visits the walls.’

‘Enough!’ exclaimed the Prince, bursting into fury at last, while his cheeks kindled, his eyes blazed, and he looked like an angel possessed by a fiend.

‘Coward! and slave! out of your own mouth you are judged, by your own words you are condemned! All last night you were absent from your post, passing the wine-cup, striking the timbrel—what do I know or care? And the gate of Ascalon was left open and unguarded as the great market-place in Babylon. For such an offence there is a fitting punishment, never yet remitted amongst the sons of Ashur.—Cover his face, and lead him forth! I have spoken.’

Then, while the archers in attendance seized on their late commander to fulfil the awful sentence, Ninyas turned with a calm brow and sweet smile to a stately official standing near, and said,

‘Those fugitives from Egypt—I can attend to their matters now. Bring them into my presence.’

The official seemed greatly troubled.

‘Let not my lord consume me utterly in his displeasure,’ said he. ‘One of them hath escaped in the night, and there is but one left.’

It was in vain to calculate the Prince’s changing moods. He laughed aloud.

‘The more fool he to stay in the town since the gate stood open,’ was his reply. ‘Put him in the fortress-dungeon, and keep him there on bitter waters

and bread of affliction till I send to bring him out.
Now lead the horses round, and unhood the hawks.
I have done enough justice for one sitting. Let us
ride forth into the wilderness to take a prey !'





CHAPTER XII.

BREAD AND SALT.

THE dromedary travelled fast; but its pace, rough and fatiguing even to Sarchedon's athletic frame, was especially trying to his companion. Anxiety and agitation had done their usual work; so that when Ishtar recovered from her swoon, refreshment and a short interval of repose seemed absolutely necessary, if she was to continue her journey through the night. Towards noon, therefore, her companion thought it wise to halt at a convenient resting-place, where a clump of palms flung their slender shadows over a desert spring; and while the dromedary, after drinking its fill, browsed on the few dried shoots afforded by the scanty vegetation of the wilderness, Sarchedon did all that a lover's care and a traveller's experience could suggest for her comfort who was thus confided to his affection.

‘You were wise,’ said he, forcing on her a share of their provision, ‘to carry off this morsel of food from Agron’s table. I know the stations well at which we can halt to drink, and that good beast yonder, though he will grow leaner and leaner, can journey on with unfailing strength till the sun has risen twice again. Eat, then, and spare not; for on the edge of the desert, when we have passed the bitter sea of the plain, there are cities of refuge, where we can obtain such food as we require for man and beast, ere we go on our way rejoicing to the country between the rivers and the cool mountains of the North.’

‘Your path is mine,’ answered Ishtar, with a fond smile; ‘I am not so faint and weak of heart now, but I am very weary, and would fain sleep.’

He disposed his mantle so as to shade her yet more securely from the pitiless sun, pillowed her head on his own broad breast, and watched her slumbers with feelings pure and holy as his whose loving eyes are resting on the face of the dead.

Presently he became himself heavy with sleep, and strove in vain to keep his faculties on the alert. He could not move a limb without disturbing his charge, and it was not long ere his sight grew dim,

his head began to droop : with keen searching glances he swept the horizon round, and then gave way, dropping at once into a deep and dreamless sleep.

The sun was low when he woke with a start that roused his companion also. The snorts and restless motions of the dromedary, straining at its tether, denoted danger. The sleepers sprang to their feet, and looked in each other's faces with anxious eyes.

That danger was indeed very near. A cloud of dust had approached within a furlong. Through its dusky veil could be heard and seen the tramp of horses, the glitter of spears.

‘They must be Philistines!’ ‘It is Ninyas!’ were the exclamations that rose to their respective lips ; while Sarchedon, snatching the broken loaf and few remaining dates from off the sand, released the dromedary, lifted Ishtar hastily to her seat, and took his own place before her on the animal's back.

Urging it to the utmost, he was painfully conscious that, although swifter and more enduring for a long journey, it was not so nimble as a horse in an effort of a few furlongs. Ere it had attained its full speed, the enemy were within a bowshot. Already an archer had halted and was taking aim.

Stung with the knowledge that, from their rela-

tive positions, he was shielded by the body of Ishtar, Sarchedon pursued his flight in an oblique direction, guiding the dromedary now to the right, now to the left, in such alternate curves and bends as he thought might baffle the hostile marksman. An injury to the beast on which their safety depended would, he knew, be only less fatal than the wounding of Ishtar herself.

The Philistine dismounted to draw his bow with exceeding care and precision. Sarchedon felt the dromedary wince beneath him. In a few more paces the animal's speed sensibly slackened; and, looking back, it sickened him to see certain red drops soaking in on its track through the sand. The successful archer had remounted to follow his companions, who were rapidly nearing the fugitives.

'It is hard,' muttered Sarchedon, grinding his teeth in rage and despair. 'But ten out of all the horsemen of Assyria would suffice to bring us through, and for the want of them we must perish. We are forgotten of Nisroch, and are doomed!'

Ishtar's face turned very pale, while she pressed her lips on his shoulder, and murmured:

'Better even here, my beloved, than in Ascalon! Behold, the time is come, and in death we shall not be divided!'

Their pace was now reduced to a walk: the arrow had sped deeply home, and the dromedary, pierced through its loins, tottered at every step. The Philistines gathered round, calling on their prey to halt.

Sarchedon glanced at his own weapons—a bow, some half-score shafts, and a short straight sword. Then he measured the strength of his opponents—fifty horsemen at least; champions of exceeding stature, fierce and terrible; children of Anak; objects of dread even to the warlike sons of Ashur—in arms against all men, holding their tenure of the wilderness by right of bow and spear.

The dromedary stopped, drooping its head, groaning and shivering in sore fear and pain. Sarchedon made signs of surrender by unstringing his bow and casting it on the sand. The tallest of the Anakim threw up the spear he had levelled, and reined his horse alongside of the dromedary; his tribe gathering round, hemmed in their captives with an armed circle.

Sarchedon was ordered to dismount. While he obeyed, Ishtar too alighted nimbly on the ground. She had scarcely touched it ere the dromedary sank to its knees, struggled, and turned over on its side. In the shock, that loaf of broken bread on which the

ill-fated pair depended for support, rolled to the leader's feet, and he lifted it greedily from the earth. He had not tasted food for many hours, and instinctively began eating, even while he gave directions to secure the prisoners. Here and there, like a scurf of mildew incrusting on some prison-wall, a white saline crystallisation flecked the sand at their feet.

Ishtar, separated from her lover, sprang at the chief's hand, tore from him a morsel of the broken loaf, dipped it in these shining particles, swallowed it hastily, and seizing the hem of his coarse homespun garment, claimed the protection of her act.

‘Bread and salt!’ said she, ‘the host's honour—the guest's right! I demand the safeguard of bread and salt!’

It was unanswerable. To have renounced the duties such an appeal exacted would have been to forfeit rank, character, respect in the tribe, authority in his own tent. Had she been his deadly enemy, thirsting for his blood, who had slain his kindred, carried off his maidens, defiled his father's grave, there was no help for it—she had eaten of his bread and salt! Henceforth his relations with her must be those of courtesy, friendship, and support—even to

drawing of sword and bending of bow in time of need.

‘It is enough!’ said the chief; turning to his followers: ‘Place the damsel on my own steed—I will myself lead it gently to our tents. For her companion, he at least is a captive and a slave. Disarm him, and bind him fast. Bread and salt is the only obligation I regard, and I swear, maiden, by your own comeliness, you were but just in time.’

He laughed while the last morsel disappeared down his stalwart throat. Ishtar, casting longing looks at Sarchedon, could not refrain from tears.

The Anakim had taken his sword from his thigh, and bound him securely with his own bowstring. He learned by the chief’s gestures that Ishtar was safe for the present from insult or ill-usage, and this was his only consolation. Standing, too, among his captors, he saw how hopeless would have been resistance, even had there ridden at his back those ten Assyrian horsemen he longed for so heartily but now. Himself a man of goodly stature and powerful frame, he did not fail to remark that the least of these giants towered fully a span over his own head, while their weighty limbs and fierce bearing brought to mind all the stories he had heard of their warlike

prowess, their haughty defiance of Ninus himself, —who hugely admired, while he waged a war of extermination against them,—the many deeds of desperate courage for which they were celebrated, and the marvellous strength which made a common proverb of the question, ‘Who shall stand before the children of Anak?’

It was natural enough for these sons of the desert to show considerable interest in the dying dromedary. An animal of such extraordinary qualities, as their critical eyes told them it possessed, would have been a far more precious capture in the wilderness than a score of maidens beautiful as Ishtar, a host of warriors stalwart as Sarchedon. A creature that, travelling on without stint or pause, from rise to set of sun, could leave their fleetest horses panting many a league behind, was simply the most valuable property a robber by profession could possess. Therefore, not until the last resources of their skill and experience had been exhausted to preserve life, did they turn sorrowfully from its carcase to the rider who had fallen into their hands.

There seemed some difficulty in disposing of him. Two loose mares, indeed, followed by their foals, had galloped up with the troop; but of these the chief,

twisting his bowstring into a halter, mounted one, while the cumbrous furniture of the dead dromedary was packed on the other. Sarchedon could hardly be expected to keep pace with his conquerors on foot, and they took counsel accordingly.

‘Better slay the Assyrian where he stands,’ said a swarthy giant, coolly balancing the profit and loss of retaining an inconvenient prisoner. ‘The sand is hot, the way weary. It seems cruel to bid him walk, and men like us, my brothers, cannot ask their steeds to bear a double burden.’ He looked proudly round on his kindred, adding conclusively,

‘Besides, we have mouths enough to fill in the tents where our wells are already dry, and there is no millet left to grind!’

‘You have said it, my brother!’ exclaimed his nearest comrade, tall and savage as himself, raising, while he spoke, the spear that Sarchedon felt another movement of that brawny arm would drive home to his heart. Nevertheless, his eye quailed not, nor did his cheek turn pale. A true son of Ashur, he could look death in the face without flinching. The striker paused with grim approving smile. His comrades, gathering round, expressed in hoarse gutturals their admiration of such manly courage.

Ishtar's looks had never left her lover. Riding beside the chief, she caught him by the garment, and claimed his interference.

'I am your guest,' said she, 'here in the open desert, even as under the shadow of your tents. All of mine should be sacred in your eyes, and I call upon you to save that man's life.'

In two bounds of his lean active mare he was beside the prisoner, and his powerful grasp had seized the threatening arm.

'Hold!' he thundered out. 'If I see fit, I will reserve that work for myself. And now, damsel,' he added, turning to Ishtar, 'you claim this man's body, and why?'

Trembling with fear, she could only think of one unanswerable plea.

'I am his wife,' she answered, blushing, with downcast eyes.

'His wife!' repeated the chief. 'Who is he, then?'

Thoughts of ransom, flight, freedom, flitted through her brain, all to be accomplished with less difficulty by the prisoner of humble grade.

'I will speak truth to my lord,' said she, 'and so find favour in his sight. His servant is but a simple archer in the hosts of the king of Assyria.'

‘What are you doing here in the wilderness,’ was the next inquiry, ‘many days’ journey from the walls of Babylon and the footstool of the Great King?’

‘The servant of my lord has been a prisoner in the land of Egypt,’ replied Ishtar; ‘he was taken by the spearmen of Pharaoh. I followed him into captivity, and ministered unto him till we found a fitting time to escape.’

‘But the dromedary?’ pursued her questioner.

‘We stole it,’ she answered simply; and the son of Anak became less inclined to doubt the probability of her statement.

‘An archer?’ he repeated, pondering, as it seemed, with all his might. ‘But for the damsel herself, the tale seems likely enough; yet must the wives of his captains be marvellously fair, when a mere bowman in the Great King’s host can come by so white a skin as that! Nevertheless,’ he added, turning to Ishtar, ‘if he be in truth an archer, and you his wife, no doubt he can bend a bow to some purpose, and you are not afraid to trust his skill. We shall prove you both on the spot.’

With these words, he halted his followers and gave them the order to dismount. Sarchedon’s arms were then freed, and a heavy bow, requiring no

slight strength to draw, was placed in his hands. Though surprised, they laughed to observe that he was equally master of the weapon with the tallest man in their tribe.

One of the band then measured out, spear-length by spear-length, the distance of a furlong on the desert sand. It seemed a considerable flight for an arrow; but every child of Anak was bowman from his youth, just as he was horseman, swordsman, spearman, and spoiler of all who came across his path.

The chief himself, lifting Ishtar from the saddle, led her to the spot his follower had marked out. Then, taking off his own belt, he buckled it so as to form a loop half a cubit in diameter.

‘Hold this in your hand,’ said he, ‘and stretch your arm to the farthest. If an archer of the Great King is skilful as the Assyrians boast, he can drive me a shaft through that loop without risk to a hair of his wife’s head.’

In vain Sarchedon protested; in vain he entreated that he might be pitted against the fiercest champion of the tribe with sword or spear, foot to foot and breast to breast.

‘No,’ said the Anakim; ‘the damsel told us he was an archer. As an archer he shall be proved.

Surely it is the wife's duty to give life, if need be, for her lord.'

Not a shade was on Ishtar's brow, not a tinge of fear in eye, mouth, or attitude, while she stood there over against him firm, erect, and beautiful; but Sarchedon felt his heart turn sick, his head swim, as he thought with horror of the result, should his hand fail him, or the desert wind divert the arrow but a cubit from its course.

He could not; no, he could not. Once, twice, he took aim—slowly, steadily, with true unfaltering eye—but the third time his powerful arm drew the bow to its utmost compass, directing its shaft at the sky, and sending it high over Ishtar's head, to quiver in the earth as far behind her as the marksman stood in front.

'An archer! an archer!' exclaimed the Anakim with one accord. 'Not a man of us, with the wind against him, could have measured such a flight as that!'

'An archer, and a good one,' assented their leader; 'but the damsel is no wife of his, nevertheless. If he were indeed her lawful lord, he had not surely weighed the scratch of an arrow on her skin against his own freedom and his life.'



CHAPTER XIII.

PARTED.

THUS arguing according to his lights, the chief directed that Sarchedon should be secured once more, and, much to the dissatisfaction of the troop, that they should place him on their horses in rotation, journeying by turns on foot. Although Ishtar failed to make as good terms for her lover as for herself, she had in no way forfeited the protection she acquired so discreetly, and rode by their leader's side, at the head of the band, as an honoured guest rather than the captive of his bow and spear. Nevertheless, all her thoughts were engrossed by his welfare whom she so dearly loved ; her whole mind was bent on forming some scheme for his security and freedom. Alas ! it was to no purpose that she wrung her hands and racked her brain. Sarchedon had fallen into the power of men for whom human life and human suffer-

ing were of less account than the wormwood that lay bruised beneath their horses' feet. If a captive proved troublesome, what matter? It was but the push of a spear, and they were rid of him once for all.

Nevertheless, these children of Anak, though possessing themselves on occasion with the strong hand of whatsoever they desired, had yet, like other spoilers, peaceful relations with certain traders whose propensities for barter could be of inestimable value to men against whom every gate was barred, every wall guarded, through all the cities of the plain. With these merchants their dealings were honourable enough, the man of trade seldom failing to make exorbitant profit from his transactions with the man of war. This mutual barter comprised almost every one of the ruder articles required for support or destruction of life. Horses, arms, camels, dates, bread, honey, mare's-milk cheeses, even goodly raiment of needlework, were exchanged freely; while a fair-faced maiden to adorn the tent, a stalwart youth to keep the herds, were more than all other merchandise sought after and desired.

Thus it came to pass that Sarchedon, though out of favour with his captors—who, like most practised

horsemen, cared not to journey much on foot—escaped a fate that seemed imminent each time some wrathful giant dismounted to make room for the prisoner, and swore freely, by his gods, that if this inconvenience was to continue through another day, he would take such order with the Assyrian as should prevent him from ever riding on horseback again.

Night was falling fast when the troop approached the encampment of their tribe; a temporary residence to be broken up and removed at an hour's notice, on the slightest occasion. Rude goats'-hair tents were scattered here and there, scarcely visible in the deepening gloom. Two or three camels lay at rest amongst half a score of horses, fastened by the fore-foot, that neighed, screamed, and fought savagely, whenever the loosening of their tethers permitted them to approach each other within striking distance. A few giants, sauntering lazily about, took little notice of the new arrivals, and their tall stately women scarcely lifted veil for a glance of curiosity, so busied were they in twisting bowstrings, repairing harness, grinding corn, pressing cheeses, or baking loaves in the embers of a scanty fire for their lords; but two swarthy travel-worn men, looking like dwarfs amongst the towering figures that surrounded them, came for-

ward to accost the chief with words of extravagant welcome and looks of eager curiosity. These were traders from the north, who examined the veiled figure of Ishtar with professional interest, expecting, no doubt, to secure a golden profit by her purchase.

In this hope they were disappointed. With extreme courtesy the chief of the Anakim conducted her to a tent standing beside his own, in which, after a long loving look at Sarchedon, she disappeared, and was seen no more.

The Anakim seemed well pleased to find these dealers, with whom they had so often traded, thus inmates of their camp. The leader, after disposing of his fair guest by consigning her to the care of a stately beauty, tender of heart as she was gigantic of frame, came out to meet them, and at once broached a proposal that found immediate favour with his followers.

‘The captive is a goodly youth,’ said he; ‘a stout warrior, an expert archer—tall and strong too for an Assyrian. What say you? These northern merchants are our brothers—shall we not sell him to them for a price?’

‘Let him go,’ exclaimed his listeners with one accord; ‘he is fair, he is precious, he is a man,

even amongst the children of Anak. But the traders from the north have eaten of our bread and drunken from our cup. All we possess is theirs, and they shall have him—at a price !

Then the elder of the traders—keen-eyed, voluble, energetic—put in his word :

‘ You have many mouths to feed, my brothers, here within your tents. Millet grows scarce, and the wells are running dry from day to day. We also have a long journey before us in the desert. Our water-skins are empty, our camels overloaded. What have we to do with a captive who eats and drinks, yet must be carried from day to day like a bale of goods ? How are your servants to bring this encumbrance with them from city to city, till they reach their home in the mountains beyond the great rivers of the plain ?’

‘ You will sell him for a talent of gold in the first market you enter,’ was the answer. ‘ Is he not a comely youth ? Fair and strong and of a ruddy countenance ? We have taken no such prey since we rode, without ceasing, four days and nights to spoil the City of Palms, by the western sea.’

‘ The Assyrians have more slaves than enough,’ answered the trader, ‘ since they brought captives

up from Egypt, by scores and by hundreds, at the chariot-wheels of the Great King. Nevertheless, are we not brothers? You shall deliver him as a gift, and take two suits of raiment in exchange.'

'He is yours, my brother,' said the chief, 'and my tents are yours; my horses, my camels, my hand-maidens; the sword on my thigh, and the bow in my hand. But shall I give my brother ripened dates and receive from him only their broken shells? Add to the raiment a measure of myrrh, at least, and three cruses of oil.'

'With a new pack-saddle,' suggested a bystander, whose own camel-furniture had reached the last stage of decay; while a dozen more took up the cry, insisting on such articles as each thought necessary to his own comfort or equipment.

'Some twisted rope for hobbles!'

'A bale of silk from Tyre!'

'Two skins of wine of Eshcol!'

'An embossed girdle!'

'A shield of brass!'

'A score of new bowstrings!'

'Or fifty shekels of silver, and no more said,' exclaimed the trader, turning from side to side, with the air of a man overcome by his own liberality.

‘Add to them a hundred,’ urged the chief; ‘and go thy way, thou and thy camels and thy servants, with the goodly slave I have given thee.’

‘One hundred shekels, and he is mine,’ returned the trader, placing his hand on the Assyrian’s shoulder in token of ownership; and thus becoming the possessor of Sarchedon at something less than the price of a good horse.

Regret was fruitless — resistance impossible. Bound hand and foot he could but grind his teeth, and submit.

The merchants made ready their camels forthwith, taking advantage of the coolness of night to journey through the desert, and guiding their course by the pilotage of the stars. So noiseless was their departure, after the bustle of concluding their bargain subsided, that they had disappeared with her lover in the darkness, ere Ishtar knew they were clear of the encampment. Seeking the spot where she had last seen Sarchedon, to find it empty, the maddening truth flashed upon her, and she could bear no more. Sick, faint, despairing, she uttered one plaintive cry, and fell senseless on the sand.

The first of the tribe who found her, lifted that

drooping form, with the ease and something of the pitiful admiration with which he would have picked up a broken lily, and bore her gently to the chief's tent. Here she was tended carefully during the night, its gigantic owner stepping softly to its entrance at intervals to assure himself of her state. With morning she was able to rise, and as her faculties resumed their vigour, she realised the whole force of the blow that had fallen.

Ishtar's nature, however, was one which is only found amongst women. Shrinking instinctively from everything approaching to pain or danger—fond, trusting, sensitive, and docile—she could yet brave and endure all things on behalf of those she loved; identifying herself so wholly with their welfare as to forget her own fears, her own weakness, and combining with the martyr's patient courage that cheerful energy, which, looking only to duty, overcomes, by sheer persistence, the difficulties it ignores. Sorrow might bend, but could not break her spirit. Like certain flowers which, tread them down as you will, lift their fair heads directly the crushing footstep has passed on, it rose, for all its meekness, the more invincible, because of its misfortunes.

Satisfied that Sarchedon was fairly gone, she set

herself the one single task of recovering him. Was he sold into captivity? He must be bought back. Was he lost? He must be found. That should now be her sole object in life; and no sooner did she feel strong enough to stand upright than she began her work without wasting another moment in consideration or delay.

Seeking the chief of the Anakim, whom she found without the encampment leading his mare to water, she placed herself in his path, standing erect and motionless till he approached. Then she rent her garment to the hem, and, lifting a handful of sand, poured it over her head.

‘The servant of my lord is in sore distress and perplexity,’ said she: ‘to whom should she come for help, but to him of whose bread and salt she has eaten within the shadow of his tents?’

The mare was rubbing her head caressingly against his breast; he pushed her away, extending both arms in token of sincerity, and replied, ‘All that I have, my life, and the lives of my tribe, herds and horses, bows and spears, are at the disposal of my guest.’

‘My lord speaks well,’ answered Ishtar. ‘But words are vain. Like the flight of a bird through

the air, they leave no track. It is the steed and the camel that stamp their mark on the sand.'

'The tongues of the Anakim are small and feeble,' said he, 'their arms long and weighty. Desire of me what you will. It is a gift, before it is asked.'

'What have you done with the Assyrian?' she murmured eagerly. 'How fares he? Whither is he gone? You will not deceive me!'

'You are my guest,' returned the chief, 'and I *cannot* deceive you. The Assyrian is sold into captivity; ere now he has journeyed many a furlong over the plain towards the city of the Great King.'

'Is he, then, bound for Babylon?' she asked, with something of hope rising in her eyes.

'I know not, of a surety,' was his answer. 'Yet I think these northern traders, possessing so goodly a captive, would hardly pass within a few days' journey of the great city and fail to visit its market. They will treat him well, and if he finds friends to redeem him, he may soon be free. No doubt in Babylon he will sell for nearly a talent of gold, and we let him go at a hundred shekels of silver! Half the price of a camel! Truly there is injustice in the desert as in the city!'

This reflection was unheard [by Ishtar, being

indeed but the echo of the chief's own thoughts, and spoken aside, as it were, into the ear of his mare.

There seemed a vague hope, then, of seeing Sarchedon once again. The girl seized her protector's hand, and, stooping but a little, pressed it against her forehead.

'You will take me under safe conduct to the gates of Babylon?' said she.

He pondered, looking very grave.

'Will you not abide with us in our tents?' he asked. 'Will you be cooped up in the walls of a city, when you might roam over the desert free as the wild ass on the plain? Take thought, damsel, once more, as a man fits a new bowstring when his arrow has missed its aim.'

'Had I a quiverful,' she replied, 'I can see but one mark for them all!'

'You are my guest,' said he stoutly; 'and go where you will, it is my duty to speed you safely on your way. You shall ride this my own mare, the most precious of my possessions, and Lotus-flower, swift, easy, gentle, will bear you like flowing water. But I must leave you, damsel, under cover of night, in the vineyards that fringe the great city. If, for

every horseman who leaps to the saddle when I shake my spear, I could muster a score, then should you enter Babylon through a breach of fifty cubits in the wall. But a wolf or a jackal would meet with more mercy than a child of Anak from the Assyrians when they set upon him, a hundred to one ! I have spoken.'

Their journey was begun accordingly. Ishtar, mounted on the chief's favourite mare, led by its owner, and guarded by a score of the stalwart sons of Anak, journeyed in security and comfort through the wilderness, until they reached its confines, and entered a territory over which Ninus, and more especially Semiramis, had thrown the protection of their severe and pitiless laws. Here they lay hidden by day, advancing swiftly and silently under cover of night ; and Ishtar could not withhold her admiration from the extraordinary skill and sagacity shown by these professional spoilers in concealing their encampment or their march. On such expeditions as the present, they were careful to ride their mares ; for these animals, docile and gentle, either loose or picketed, never disclosed their presence by those paroxysms of neighing and screaming to which their less tractable brothers were exceedingly prone.

At length, soon after dawn, Ishtar found herself alone with the chief at an easy distance from the great city. Taking the ass of a poor peasant, who dared not even protest against the spoliation, he had dismounted his guest from the high-bred mare, and placed her on the humbler animal's back. The troop had been left many a league in the desert. Their leader, at the utmost personal risk, was within a short ride of Babylon. It was time to depart, and thus he bade his charge farewell :

‘ May thy corn never fail nor thy well run dry !
May thy vines yield a hundredfold, and men-children play round thy feet ! Thou camest into my tent like the breeze from the mountain. Though the breeze passeth on, the tent is glad because of the coolness it hath left. The desert is boundless, and we scour it far and wide. Behold ! Where rides a son of Anak, there hast thou a brother. I have spoken.’

He swung himself on the mare from which he had lately dismounted, caught Lotus-flower by the bridle, and sped away like the wind.

She watched the gigantic form till it disappeared amongst the dust raised by those two fleet animals, of which toil and privation seemed in no way to

diminish the mettle or speed; then she looked towards Great Babylon, towering in state with her glittering pinnacles, her flashing gates, her frowning, forbidding walls, and felt that she had lost a friend.





CHAPTER XIV.

FORLORN.

SHE had lost a friend, and where was there another left? Her father slain, her home despoiled, the man she loved sold into slavery and carried she knew not where: could human lot be more lonely, more hopeless? Yet she never lost heart. Plodding on in lowly guise, riding that humble animal, there was yet dominant in her tender frame a hopeful courage, such as does not always animate the warrior in his chariot, a spirit of self-reliance and self-devotion that would have ennobled a sceptred monarch on his throne.

Reaching the well-remembered spot where she used to watch for the return of Arbaces, where she had first met Sarchedon riding home with tidings from the Great King, it was no wonder that she saw the Well of Palms through a mist of tears.

Nevertheless she dashed them hastily from her eyes, and summoned all her energies, when she became aware of a troop of horsemen moving rapidly on her track. To be discovered by these, she knew too well, would entail the risk of insult, perhaps injury, and the certainty of delay. While they were yet afar off, she leaped from the ass, and, taking advantage of her familiarity with the locality, concealed herself behind a broken wall that skirted the fountain, while the animal jogged leisurely home, to the relief and comfort of its disconsolate owner.

So near the great city, a solitary wayfarer was an object of little interest. She soon perceived she had escaped observation by the movements of the party, who galloped on towards Babylon without diverging to visit her hiding-place. She determined, however, to remain concealed yet a while longer, and had no cause to regret her caution, when a single horseman, detaching himself from the rest, approached the marble basin of the Well of Palms, as if to water his good white steed, ere he passed on.

Half a bow-shot off, she recognised the animal with a start of fear, suspense, surprise, sweetened by a thrill of love. She could not be deceived: it was Merodach! That spotless frame, those glancing

limbs, that gallant bearing, could belong to no other animal in the land of Shinar; and where Merodach bent to the rein, it seemed cruelly hard Sarchedon's should not be the hand to guide.

Watching with fond and eager eyes, she turned sick and faint, while she crouched down, like some poor hunted fawn, into her shelter; for on its back, soothing the good horse with many a gentle word and tender caress, sat the form of him whom most she feared and hated in the bounds of earth. Yes; the beautiful face she seemed yet to behold lulled on her own breast, in flushed and drunken sleep, was surely there, within a few paces, gazing dreamily into the distance; while Merodach, scarcely wetting his dark muzzle in the water, pawed and snorted in restless impatience to rejoin the companions he had left.

What was Ninyas doing here? Had the prince pursued her from Ascalon? was he on her track, and searching for her even now? could she escape him, neither in the city nor the plain? All these thoughts whirled through her brain, while she lay still as death, scarcely daring to breathe, peering at her enemy through a crevice of the crumbling wall with pale face and wild dilated eyes.

The horseman seemed moody and abstracted—

strangely lavish of caresses for his steed, strangely indifferent to the heat of the sun, the ripple of the fountain, everything but his own engrossing thoughts. Without dismounting, he sat wrapped in meditation for a space of time that appeared interminable to the watcher, ere he woke up, as it were, with a start, and, curbing his beast's impatience, rode away at a walk to enter the city by a different gate from that which the party he had left were about to pass through.

Emerging from her shelter, though not until the white horse and his rider had disappeared in the distance, Ishtar felt sadly perplexed. To abide by her present hiding-place would be imprudent in the highest degree, for the Well of Palms was the resort of every traveller who approached Babylon on its southern side. If she retraced her steps, and fled once more into the wilderness, she must perish from thirst and fatigue; for to be afoot in the desert without a camel was to be adrift on the sea without a boat; and she had even abandoned the honest plodding beast that brought her thus far after she left her gigantic protector at sunrise. She almost wished now she had remained in their tents with the Anakim, intrusting to those tameless denizens of the waste her

own safety and the task of eventually recovering her lover.

She saw no other course left but to trudge wearily on, and pass, if possible, unnoticed through the gate of Babylon, there to seek high and low some real friend, who, for her father's sake, would give her bread to eat, a roof to cover her, and aid in the one object of her life.

Wrapping her veil closely round her, counterfeiting as well as she could the gait and bearing of a woman advanced in years and of humble grade, Ishtar toiled slowly forward, carrying indeed a sorely laden heart into that glittering capital of splendour, luxury, and sin.

The troop that had so disquieted this forlorn and friendless fugitive trampled bravely on, raising clouds of dust, through which flashed the magnificence of their arms and apparel, as a beautiful face sparkles and blushes through its tawny veil. Without waiting for the detached horseman, they hastened towards the city, galloping, it seemed, from sheer exuberance of spirits rather than from any actual necessity for speed. The principal figure in the group, to whom the others turned obsequiously for guidance, was Assarac; and the eunuch's bearing, as he managed

his steed with the graceful ease of an Assyrian born, was dignified and commanding in the extreme.

By his side rode Beladon, laughing, talking, gesticulating, proud to show his countrymen that a priest of Baal could back a horse and bend a bow with the best of them—that if his sacred character debarred him from seeking fame in the war-chariot, he was yet a true child of Ashur for skill and daring in the chase.

His eye gleamed, his cheek glowed; there were stains of blood on his linen garments; and from his horse's chest dangled the muzzle and fangs of a full-grown lion, that had fallen since sunrise to his bow.

He was never weary of detailing this achievement, dwelling in boundless satisfaction on his own success and the formidable size of his prey.

Assarac listened, with his usual imperturbable smile.

‘I called on Baal,’ said Beladon, ‘and urged my good horse to his speed; for already the lion was scarce the cast of a javelin from the reeds, and had he reached his thicket, I must have gone in and finished him on foot. By the belt of Nimrod, I can tell you it was no comely face he showed me when I came up with him. His eyes glared like the car-

buncles on the palace-gate, and he bared all these fangs that hang here at my horse's breast, as who should say, Behold ! a score of proven warriors, and every one an enemy ! I drew my bow thus—to my very ear—and as he rose on his hind-legs, I pierced him straight and true right through his open mouth, then turned my hand and galloped off across the plain, lest he should rise up ere life was extinct, and tear my good horse limb from limb in his death-pang.'

'So the spearmen gathered round and slew him,' observed Assarac.

'The spearmen gathered round and slew him,' repeated the other, 'after they found him disabled by the might of this right arm. When I turned back and got down to measure his carcass, there was my shaft driven through the roof of his mouth, cleaving his very skull.'

'Was there not an arrow in his body when he fell?' asked the eunuch.

Beladon coloured and looked vexed.

'The king had, indeed, loosed a shaft at the beast when first we roused him,' said he. 'Doubtless, the royal hand never misses its mark.'

'Had you come between Ninus and his prey in the olden time,' observed the other, 'not all the host

of heaven could have turned aside his wrath. He would have impaled you before set of sun.'

'He loved the chase dearly,' answered Beladon, 'as did the Great Queen, and Ninyas too, till lately. What has come over him now? He leaps to the saddle at dawn—hasty, eager, excited, as though every beast of chase between the rivers must be swept away forthwith, slaying and sparing not—then, after one fierce dash at the wild-bull, one savage thrust at the lion, leaves his followers, as he left us even now, to ride slowly home, sad, moody, and alone. Always on the same steed too. It seems as though he cared for nothing under heaven but the white horse with the wild eyes.'

'Tis a good beast,' answered the other, scrutinising the face of his follower, 'and worthy to bear the person of a king.'

'A good beast indeed,' said Beladon simply, 'and belonged once to as good a warrior as ever lifted spear or emptied wine-cup. It seems but yesterday that Sarchedon brought back the Great King's signet, and made his night's lodging with us in the temple of our god. What has become of him now? I would we knew!'

'I would we knew!' repeated Assarac in a care-

less tone, as if he only echoed the other's sentiments, not as if he would have given wealth untold, deemed no waste of blood or treasure too lavish, for the information.

Reining their horses to a walk, the gaudy troop had already passed through one of her gates, and entered the crowded streets of Babylon. Thinking their king was amongst the party, his people gathered round in considerable numbers, and appeared disappointed to miss the beautiful face and form they so seldom looked on now. It was a common remark amongst all classes, that the wild, free-living, free-spoken young prince had become strangely solemn and reserved since his accession to the throne. There was far less revelry in the palace than in the days of stern old Ninus. His son seldom rode abroad through the streets or showed himself to his people. The shadow of the priests of Baal seemed over the monarch, and it was known that Assarac had great influence in the royal counsels. As is usual in such cases, the favourite came in for a larger share of obloquy than his lord.

Nevertheless, there is always enough popularity about a gay cavalcade to insure its welcome in a pleasure-loving city like Babylon. Assarac could not

but observe that, although there were dark frowns and angry glances in the outskirts of the crowd, the nearer spectators shouted their welcome cordially enough, pressing in to kiss the trappings of his horse, the hem of his garment, with all the transitory enthusiasm of their impressionable nature.

‘’Tis an easy people to rule!’ whispered Beladon in the ear of his superior. ‘Believers in Baal, and a thousand gods besides; mark the reverence they pay your sacred character. Surely the sons of Ashur love the linen vestment of the priest.’

‘Were not their shouts yet louder, their welcome kinder, to the scarlet and steel of the Great King’s horsemen, when he marched in from Egypt?’ returned Assarac. ‘Trust me, Beladon, they bend lowest when they carry the heaviest load. They love deepest where most they have to fear.’

‘And they fear Baal,’ said the other.

‘Only because they know not Nisroch,’ replied Assarac. ‘God or man can be great for this false fickle nation only until there cometh a greater than he. Do they not offer homage willingly to Abitur of the Mountains? And why? Because they dread his power, not knowing its nature nor its extent. Their ruler should indeed be a god in all but bene-

volence. He must have no natural sympathies, no human weaknesses, no remorse, no pity, and, above all, no fear.'

'There is but one man in the land of Shinar who is above and without these softer failings of his kind. May I sit on his right hand henceforward, as to-day!' was Beladon's insidious reply.

Though half despising the flattery of his follower, Assarac smiled. Yet it did not escape the other's observation, ever on the alert, that in the eunuch's smile lurked an expression of weariness and sorrow almost amounting to pain.

'The king has faithful followers,' said he, 'and wise counsellors—may he live for ever!'

The crowd hemmed them in very close; his last sentence, though uttered in a low voice, was caught up and repeated by a thousand tongues. Through the noise and confusion that prevailed, only Assarac could hear the whisper of his subordinate,

'Baal is great. What are kings and princes compared to the mighty Assyrian god? Let Baal rule alone in Babylon and through all the land of Shinar; while Assarac, the interpreter of his will to the people, twines the sacred lotus round the royal sceptre, he needs but stretch out his hand to take.'

‘As the serpent of Ashtaroth twines round a man’s heart!’ answered the other. And Beladon, looking in his face, marvelled to see it drawn and white, as of one who strives with an agony of mortal pain.





CHAPTER XV.

THE LION'S CUB.

It was but according to an established principle of nature and general law of race, that the descendants of Nimrod should entertain a keen predilection for the chase. In this particular Ninyas, notwithstanding habits of luxury and effeminacy at home, formed no exception to the princes of his line. He was never so happy as when urging a good horse to speed after the scudding ostrich, loosing a grim leopard from its leash to spring on the fleet antelope, tracking with fierce and heavy hounds the footprints of some lordly lion on the desert sand, or watching with eager eyes his long-winged falcons wheeling and stooping in the desert sky. Skilled in bodily exercises, sitting his horse with the graceful ease of constant practice, flushed, panting, joyous, he rode to and fro, beautiful as a woman and radiant as a god.

After that night of revelry, on which he so lowered the pride of Rekamat, to be in turn foiled by Ishtar, it was not strange that this wayward prince should wake from a feverish sleep in the very worst of humours; but having relieved his irritated feelings by condemning the captain of the gate to a painful death, and settled himself in the saddle for a long day's pleasure on the plain, he felt sufficiently comforted to enter with considerable zest into the amusement of the hour.

While his horse was fresh, he had succeeded in approaching within bowshot of some wild asses to wound one of the herd, wantonly and uselessly, with an arrow from his own royal quiver. He had fairly ridden down and secured an ostrich of unusual plumage, breaking the bird's long legs by a blow from the club, which he flung while galloping at speed with marvellous dexterity. His leopard had not failed to strike an antelope at the first pounce; his hawks never once missed their quarry, nor delayed returning obedient to the lure; moreover, he had brought an old male lion to bay, and, riding in on him, wounded the monster so severely with his spear, that although it had crawled for refuge into certain inaccessible rocks, it must

have died before night ; and as none of his servants had come up to help him, the glory was exclusively his own.

Accordingly, when he paced back into Ascalon at sundown, weary and dishevelled, yet happy and triumphant, he felt at peace with mankind ; revenge seemed hateful, anger impossible, and all he thirsted for was a cup of wine.

Dismounting within the gate of the fortress, it was served as his foot touched the ground. Then he bethought him of the fugitive from Egypt, to whom he had not yet granted audience, and desired that this visitor should be brought into his presence forthwith. Sethos, in his dark and cheerless apartment, scooped out of the very rock on which the fortress stood, received such a summons with considerable dismay. The care taken to secure him, the dreary nature of his lodging, the coarse food brought by his only visitor, a spearman, belted with bow and quiver, grim, silent, and armed to the teeth, denoted that his offence, whatever it might be, was considered of exceeding gravity, and that in all likelihood his imprisonment would soon be terminated by death.

Bold and joyous as was his nature, the cup-bearer followed his conductor with a sad brow and a

heavy heart. He knew the prince's character well, and a peal of laughter from his lord, while he bent low at the royal feet, served by no means to allay his fears.

‘So I have kept him in ward from sunrise to sunset,’ exclaimed Ninyas, shaking his sides and wiping his eyes, in the exuberance of his mirth, ‘little guessing who he was! The Great King’s cup-bearer, the curled and scented ornament of all the Assyrian host, the daintiest flower in the whole of dainty Babylon; for whom the royal banquet was but a coarse meal of broken meat; the royal court, blazing with a thousand torches, but a dim and dismal den. And I ordered him bitter water, and bread of affliction; shut him up in a stone cell without a breath of air or a gleam of light! By the beard of Ashur, I shall never recover it. O Sethos, Sethos! had I known this morning it was you, I could not have sat my horse for laughing all day. And think what a spoil we should have lost! Five antelopes, man; an ostrich as tall as my spear; scores of all the birds of heaven; and a lion, though we brought him not in, so tawny that he seemed almost black, old, and fierce, like Nimrod himself, big as a wild bull, and with fangs more than a span long. By the

quiver of Merodach, I have not taken such a prey since we hunted that pleasant time in the northern mountains, before the Egyptian campaign !'

Ninyas seemed in high good-humour. Sethos, raising his eyes to look in the prince's joyous face, knew that the bitterness of death was past.

'His servant has received many good gifts from my lord,' was the conventional reply. 'Shall he not accept evil without complaint? There can be no injustice between a master and his slave.'

'But how come you here?' asked Ninyas, ignoring, from force of habit, the accustomed formalities of the other. 'They tell me you rode in with half-a-score of bowmen, pursued by the hosts of Egypt—chariots and horsemen, banner, bow, and spear. I would have loosed a shaft or two amongst them nevertheless, had they been a hundred to one.'

'My lord speaks well,' answered Sethos proudly. 'His servant slew their leader with his own hand ere he turned rein, and fled to seek shelter with my lord !'

'I would I had been at your back!' exclaimed the prince, kindling. 'I grew weary unto death of their country, I own, when we rode there under the banner of Ashur, and I never wished to set eyes on

one of their tawny faces or their supple backs again. But to have them brought here at bow-shot distance, without any trouble, like a troop of wild asses or a herd of deer! Ah, Sethos, you were always a favourite of the gods—Baal, Nisroch, Merodach, and above all, Ashtaroth, Queen of Light!’

‘My lord gives praise to his servant out of his own bounty,’ answered the other. ‘Hath Ninyas ever yet been known to come down from saddle or war-chariot without taking the first spoil? And as for Ashtaroth—surely, fairer game than feeds in field or forest falls to him, even before he lifts his bow.’

The prince loved flattery dearly, though he had wit to despise the flatterer. He smiled well pleased.

‘I cannot blame the gods,’ said he; ‘they have served me better than ever I served *them*. Do you remember the old lion we slew in the mountains ten days’ march from Nineveh, when you drove my chariot up to the axles through the marsh? That was a prey worth the taking of a king. How he grinned and roared, and fought, with my javelin through his shoulder, and my arrow in his neck! Had he not torn at the chariot-wheel with claws and fangs, in blind senseless rage, we had hardly brought

his dark skin home to make a foot-cloth for the Great Queen. Believe me, man, the beast I slew to-day might have been whelped in the same litter—as old, as savage, flecked in the jaws with gray, leaner perhaps, and a thought longer—say a span—from muzzle to tail. I am no boaster, Sethos; but surely old Nimrod himself can scarce have won nobler triumphs over the fiercest beasts of chase than mine!’

‘My lord hath spoken,’ answered Sethos. ‘Is he not unrivalled in war, in the chase, in love?’

The last word seemed to touch some painful chord, rouse some bitter memory in his listener. The prince’s handsome face reddened, and then turned pale. When he spoke again, it was the cup-bearer’s turn to feel discomposed; for the voice of Ninyas sounded cold and hard, his manner had become stern and almost severe.

The lion’s cub so far resembled his fierce old father, that his mood would change on occasion at a moment’s notice from joyous good-humour and hilarity to a paroxysm of wrath, all the more dangerous that it was so sudden and unexpected.

With Ninus, however, such an access of passion betrayed itself in uncontrolled violence of language

and gesture; while his son, on the contrary, concealed his feelings under a smooth brow and calm demeanour, far more implacable than the savage outbreak of his sire. The one would order an offender to be taken out and strangled on the spot, but forgive him perhaps before the fatal covering had been drawn round his head. The other spoke softly, nodded courteously, passed sentence of death in a whisper, and remitted it for no consideration of justice or mercy whatsoever.

But the prince loved pleasure even more than cruelty, and was therefore popular enough with the multitude, who were willing to give his beautiful face and graceful form credit for every royal virtue; believing no evil of one who rode abroad so gallantly in such shining raiment, sat so long at the feast among brave men and beautiful women, drank so deep, laughed so loud, and looked so fair, garland on head and wine-cup in hand.

‘You have not yet accounted for your presence in Ascalon,’ said he coldly.

And Sethos, knowing well that he must trim his sails according as the wind blew, answered with the gravity of some high official making a report :

‘In order to fulfil the mission of my lord, I was

compelled to journey swiftly, tarrying nowhere by the way. Therefore were our horses somewhat faint and wearied, or we had laughed to scorn the speed of the Egyptian, flinging sand like the wild ass in their faces who pursue.'

'You should have halted and fought it out,' observed Ninyas.

'The embassy of my lord spoke indeed of defiance,' replied Sethos; 'but his servant was accompanied by scarce a score of horsemen. The hosts of Egypt swarmed like locusts in a south wind. Had the city of refuge stood but one furlong farther off, our bones had lain bleaching in the desert, or we had been again brought into the terrible presence of Pharaoh ere now.'

'Then you have seen Pharaoh?' interrupted Ninyas. 'What is he like?'

The cup-bearer looked surprised.

'I have indeed stood before him,' he answered, 'and spoken with Pharaoh face to face. His throne is of beaten gold, studded with jewels; his garments shine and glisten so that he seems clad in light; but the man himself is of low stature and puny frame, lean, sallow, undignified. It is only the line of Ashur who are princes in bearing as in blood.'

‘The princes of Ashur go out to war with their hosts,’ responded Ninyas, accepting the compliment greedily enough. ‘Pharaoh lay soft in his palace beyond the river many a night while I was watching with bow and spear.’

‘Pharaoh lives for ever,’ said the other. ‘So proclaim his captains and officials from rise to set of sun. Perhaps it is that he cares not to front death in battle or the chase. Nevertheless, he entertained me with all the honour due to him who carried the message of my lord the king.’

‘And what message had my lord the king for one with whom he might have made his own terms at his very gate?’ asked the prince.

Once more the puzzled look crossed his face, while Sethos pondered ere he replied. The path he trod seemed very dangerous; he must look well to his balance at every step. Taking courage, he answered frankly, yet with a certain caution,

‘What am I, that I should stand in the light of the king’s countenance? The reed withers in the furnace and is consumed, the bar of iron doth but bend and obey. On such a matter it was not fitting that the lowest of his servants should speak with the king face to face. I received my instructions from

him who stood on the king's right hand. Shall I repeat them to my lord ?'

Ninyas watched him keenly.

'Why not ?' he asked.

'I was commanded to make all speed through the desert, until I came into the presence of Pharaoh himself,' said the cup-bearer ; 'to speak out boldly, as befitted him who represented the glory of Nimrod ; to demand the body of a son of Ashur, lying captive in the land of Egypt ; and if aught but good had befallen him, to warn Pharaoh that Assyria would come down with her chariots and horsemen to take a life for every hair of Sarchedon's head.'

The prince started as if he was stung.

'Sarchedon !' he exclaimed. 'Was it even so ? And you brought him back with you to Ascalon ?'

'It seemed but my duty,' answered Sethos, 'to shelter in a city of refuge one on whose head the king set so high a price, rather than suffer him to fall a second time into the hand of the false Egyptian.'

Ninyas seemed much disturbed, betraying his vexation, as the other could not but perceive, in the unnatural composure of his demeanour.

'And these instructions ?' said he, after a pause.

‘ They must have been given by one in authority, standing at the right hand of my lord the king.’

‘ They were given by Assarac, high - priest of Baal,’ answered the cup-bearer. ‘ Surely my lord is but proving his servant with empty words. What am I, that I should seek to show aught but the truth in the sight of my lord ?’

‘ Assarac, high-priest of Baal !’ repeated Ninyas. ‘ And at the right hand of the Great King ! Beware, my friend ; beware ! There is yet a morsel of bread and a cruse of water in that dungeon where you passed the day. When a son of Ashur speaks to his lord with a lie in his mouth, surely his face is already covered, and his blood lies on his own head.’

Hurt, alarmed, and in the utmost perplexity, the tears rising to his eyes, Sethos could but answer in a broken voice :

‘ The Great King is gone to the gods ! If my lord should slay his servant, he can only speak of that which he hath seen and knows.’

In spite of all his self-control, Ninyas turned deadly pale, rocking and tottering where he stood, like a man stricken sore in fight. Then he called for another cup of wine, and turning to Sethos, with a smile said only :

‘Leave me now; I am wearied, and the sun smote fierce to-day on the desert sand. See that they water not my horse till he is cool; and, Sethos, let not man nor woman come near me till I clap my hands.’

With these words Ninyas retired to his chamber, and was seen no more, leaving the cup-bearer at his wits’ end with astonishment, a state which was shared more or less by all the household; for was not the banquet spread, the hall lighted, the wine poured out, yet the prince absent? Such an event had never yet come to pass in the memory of his servants; and Rekamat, who hoped to-night she would regain some of the footing she had lost in his favour, was loud in protestations of astonishment and vexation.

She was yet more dismayed, however, on the morrow to learn that a troop of horsemen had passed out of the gate at sunrise, and disappeared in the desert towards the north; the watchman farther reporting, that in their centre, on the prince’s favourite steed, rode a woman closely veiled. Rekammat bit her lip in sore vexation, to keep back the tears of spite and shame that rose brimming to her eyes.



CHAPTER XVI.

THE POWER OF THE DOG.

TOWARDS sunset, Ishtar wandered into Babylon anxious, forlorn, and desolate, yet carefully nursing in her breast that spark of true courage she inherited from a line of warriors. In plain attire, travel-worn and dejected, she passed on among a crowd of wayfarers, heeded by none. Desirous of escaping observation, she yet could not help reflecting bitterly how everything about her was changed, herself perhaps most of all.

It seemed but yesterday that the daughter of Arbaces moved abroad attended by a retinue of servants, escorted by a troop of horsemen. Even when most she affected privacy, she could not stir without women, camels, foot-cloths, fan-bearers, all the encumbrances of rank. Eager eyes were fain to pierce

her veil, that they might gaze on her beauty ; kind voices wafted after her their welcome or good wishes, because of her own graces and her father's fame. She was flattered, admired—above all, loved. And now she must shrink beneath the wall, to avoid the rude camel-driver and his ungainly charge. The water-carrier, tottering under his jars, gruffly bade her stand aside to let him pass ; and the only courtesy she experienced amongst that hurrying, shifting throng was from a curled and bearded bowman, who would fain have lifted her veil as the price of his protection, and whose good offices she repulsed with a scornful energy that put him to flight in considerable dismay.

She wept a little after this effort, and hurried on faster to the shelter of what had once been her home.

In the days of mourning that succeeded his death, or, as his subjects were taught to believe, the enthronement amongst the stars of the Great King, a strange repressive power had made itself felt amongst all classes in the city of Babylon. An unseen hand, cold, weighty, and irresistible, seemed laid upon the whole people, forbidding any demonstration of sympathy, and indeed all expression of feeling whatever, public or private. The king's host, as it was still

termed, had been recalled within the walls, and amalgamated cordially enough with their comrades of that army which was avowedly in the interests of the queen ; but the citizens gained little from such an alliance, save more mouths to feed, more prejudices to consult, and it might almost be said more masters to serve. The priests of Baal too, with whom, in the reign of Ninus, his men of war had been covertly at variance, seemed now on terms of the closest brotherhood with all who handled bow and spear. Such a fusion of two non-productive classes boded little good to those whose industry supported both ; and the thoughtless Babylonian, usually so light-hearted, found himself saddened and depressed when he had fondly expected to eat, drink, and be merry, under the easy rule of a lord who preferred feast to fray, bubble of wine-cup to clash of sword and spear. From a change of rulers Babylon had expected a change of those principles which constitute government itself. Ninus, though firm and impartial, was severe, and reined her with a strong hand ; she had therefore always looked forward to the day when his son should sway the sceptre, as a time of ease and luxury, with license for every man to think and speak and act as seemed

good in his own eyes. But Ninus went to the stars, Ninyas reigned in his stead; and the citizens wondered, with blank faces, why bread was dear and water scarce, the priest covetous, the warrior oppressive, and the royal yoke harder than ever to be borne.

Under such circumstances none thought it worth while to bestir himself for the bettering of his own position, or the assistance of his neighbour. If a well was choked, he cared not to clear it; if a wall fell down, he let it lie. There was a shadow over the city, and its inhabitants already regretted the wise foresight and judicious government of the Great Queen.

Ishtar felt very weary before she reached the portals of her father's house, very sad and friendless when she crossed its threshold and looked round on the precincts of her home. The sun was down, but a clear cold moon poured its beams over the scene of desolation and decay. It was obvious that the palace must have been abandoned on the night of its attack, and that no friend or servant of Arbaces had revisited it since. The assailants, having another object than plunder, carried away from his dwelling only that one of his possessions the chief captain most dearly valued, which they took

with them to Ascalon. But an unguarded house could scarce remain unspoiled for a single night in such a city as Babylon. And Ishtar found her father's dwelling rifled and sacked from roof-tree to door-stone completely, as though an enemy had taken it by storm. In the court-yard remnants of shawls, silks, precious arms, costly flagons, strewed the inlaid pavement, dented and defaced by marks of struggling feet; but the shreds were frayed and torn, stained with wine or stiff with blood, the weapons bent or broken; the flagons lay crushed and battered where they had been emptied and dashed down. Pushing aside some rent hangings at the entrance of the court, night-hawks shrieked and night-owls hooted, while a bat, flying out, struck cold and clammy against Ishtar's cheek. Her flesh crept with horror; but that sorrow mastered fear, she must have cried aloud for help.

The moon shone brighter as it mounted in the sky. Patches of dried blood stained courts and passages, a splintered javelin and a naked sword, lay at her feet—fragments of alabaster and gilding broken from the sculptures on the wall strewed the floor; but whatever loss the assailants might have sustained, it seemed that they had borne away their wounded

and their dead. As yet she was spared the ghastly presence of a corpse.

Cold and faint, she leaned against the wall to take breath. It had come to this. Amongst all that shattered splendour in those very halls where her father feasted scores of warriors, every one a captain of ten thousand, there was now neither bread to eat nor wine to drink—no, nor the means of purchasing so much as a draught of fair water; though so short a while ago the palace of Arbaces had been stored with royal gifts and costly merchandise, meat and drink, gold, precious stones, and spoil of war.

If she could but find even an embroidered baldrick, a jewelled dagger, whole and uninjured, something she might carry into the market, and sell for as many shekels of silver as would put food into her mouth, and enable her to continue those efforts for the delivery of Sarchedon, which should never cease but with her life !

Resolving to search the palace through, she pushed on, traversing the court she had lately entered, and so reached the well-known stairs leading to the women's apartment, that heretofore she had so often climbed dreamily thinking of her lover, or run

down blithely with a smiling welcome for her sire. Here were indeed traces of deadly strife. Embroidered curtains, torn and disordered, dangled from the wall; defaced sculptures and shattered slabs encumbered the pavement; a slender column of bronze, supporting a brazier, was bent and twisted to its pedestal; a broken bow lay across a torch long since extinguished on the floor. The lower part of the hall was black in shadow, while a flood of moonlight bathed roof and rafters, painted wood-work, gilded pinnacle, all that elaborate ornament and finish which had been above the level of the conflict.

As her foot touched the first step, two lurid eyes glared on her through the darkness, and a long lean object glided swiftly by, brushing her garments as it passed.

It was the wild-dog disturbed from his loathsome meal.

She had no fear now; only a thrill of intense suffering, with a fierce hideous desire for revenge. Wreathing her white arms above her head, she flung herself down by something, that an instinct of love, stronger than the very horror of the situation, told her must be the remains of her father.

A cloven head-piece had rolled from the smooth

and grinning skull. His fleshless fingers still closed round the handle of a sword. He lay where he fell, his face to heaven, grim, unyielding, defiant even in death; but the wild-dogs had stripped him to the bone, and it was a bare bleached skeleton against which Ishtar laid her pale and shuddering cheek.

There rose through roof and rafters, curdling her very blood, a shrill and piercing shriek. She never knew it was the wail of agony wrung from her by her own despair.

Alas for the brave spirit passed away, the loyal heart, cold and still, kind and true! He had been struck down in *her* defence; had been willing, eager, to purchase with drops of life-blood the brief moments that might have aided *her* to escape; his last blow struck on *her* behalf, his last breath drawn for the child who had sat on his knees and lain in his bosom. The noblest warrior that ever drew bow in the service of Ninus, fit leader of the brave who were arrayed under the banner of Ashur at his behest. She was proud of him even then.

As the moonbeams crept across the pavement where it lay, they were so far merciful, that they revealed to her the ghastly sight by imperceptible degrees. She seemed to gather strength from him

whose blood ran in her veins, stretched out in that white distorted heap, scarce retaining a semblance of human form. She thought of him in the majesty of his strength, the pride and beauty of his manhood, recalling the broad hand that used to rest so lovingly on her head, the noble brow that never wore a frown for *her*; and the weight seemed lifted from her brain, the iron probe taken out of her heart, while sobs convulsed her bosom, and scalding tears rushed to her eyes.

She became human again. She was a woman now, and she wept.

It was a weary watch. The long night through she never left his skeleton, never changed her position, nor ceased her silent mourning, nor moved a limb, but to drive away the wild-dogs that glided in and out the entrance of the court, drawing near with eager whine and wistful eyes while she was still, scouring off in vexed dismay when she stirred, to return again, and yet again, till dawn.

Though grief like hers may for a time dominate the requirements of the body, these assert themselves at last. With the return of day Ishtar felt conscious of hunger and weakness, the one threatening to overpower her if the cravings of the other were not

speedily satisfied. - She knew she must exert herself at once, lest she too should sink down, and die by him whose bones lay bleaching beside her there.

Would it not be better so? What had she to do with life now? There was but one consideration to rouse her from the apathy of despair. The last obsequies must be paid to the remains of her father; and who would insure for him that final mark of respect if she was gone? She would live at least till this was accomplished; and therefore must she go out into the city, and stand unveiled in square and street till she could find a friend. Surely amongst all those men of war who went forth to battle at his word might pass one who would recognise his daughter, and afford the only tribute of respect left to the memory of Arbaces!

From the resolution to make her effort grew strength to attempt it. With exertion came renewed vitality, and with vitality a spark of hope. Yes, even through those depths of gloom and misery glimmered faint reflective rays of that which was not quite impossible; as the light of heaven, though blurred and dim, reaches one who is sinking in the green bewildering sea.

Then she rose up, tore a strip of curtain from

the portal, and lifting the skeleton with tender reverent care, disposed it in a seemly attitude under that scanty covering, so as to baffle wild-dog and vulture till her return.

In raising her father's remains she found under them a baldrick in which his sword had hung, embroidered by her own hands. Even this had been gnawed and partly eaten away; but it was fastened with a jewelled clasp, pressed down beneath the broad shoulder-blade of the dead warrior, and had escaped alike the eyes of cupidity and the fangs of hunger. It was a treasure to her now. Drawing it hastily out, she concealed it in her bosom, kissing the precious relic once with eager passionate lips, because she must part from it so soon.

Then she disposed his strange shroud about the remains of Arbaces, looked high and low, to earth and heaven, with wild imploring eyes, seeking aid, but finding none, and so walked out alone into the world from her home.





CHAPTER XVII.

THE WINGS OF A DOVE.

AN hour after sunrise, Babylon the Great was up and dressed like any other restless lady, wakeful and astir, warm with life and beauty, rich in gaudy colours, bright with gold and gems.

Trumpets that mustered warriors by thousands were pealing from her walls. Priests of Baal and prophets of the grove were chanting their idolatrous hymns, to ring of harp or sound of timbrel, through a score of stately temples, a hundred squares, terraces, and open places in the city. Oxen were lowing, sheep bleating, as they stood in droves herded together for sacrifice. Peasants from without were toiling under their market-produce; merchants of Tyre and of the South were guiding their camels, laden with bales of costly goods for the mart of nations; a hundred streams of labour, luxury,

and traffic converged to this common centre ; and through all her gates the wealth of a hundred countries was flowing in to enrich the mistress of the world.

She accepted their tribute like a queen lavish of smiles and honours, repaying real substantial benefits with bright glitter of ornament, with show of tinsel and gilding, with a false welcome and a cold farewell. Her visitors took their leave, the better for her notice, by an acquired taste for deteriorating luxuries, an increased discontent with the manly simplicity of their homes. They thronged in and out nevertheless, crowding especially to one quarter of the city, on the banks of the broad river, at an equal distance from the two royal palaces, where it was customary to hold a market for all kind of wares and provisions, where a man might purchase, according to his needs, a barley loaf or a dress of honour, a rope of onions or a string of pearls.

Here prevailed that stir, turmoil, and confusion of tongues which must necessarily accompany such gatherings of different tribes and professions, especially under a southern sky. The plain-spoken countryman discoursed volubly on the luxuriant growth of garden-stuff that overflowed his baskets ;

the keener-witted citizen cheapened and chaffered, sparing neither laughter nor sarcasm, nor shrill and deafening abuse; dark-skinned Ethiopians grinned, nodded, clapped their hands, and rubbed their woolly heads in mingled amazement and delight; haughty warriors stalked in and out the stalls of the various traders with martial strides and offensive demeanour, taking at their own price such things as they required, or, on occasion, omitting the ceremony of payment altogether; troops of women, chiefly from the lowest class, added their eager voices to the general clamour, hanging their swaddled infants at their backs, hoisting them on their shoulders, or extricating with loud outcries and hearty cuffs the stronger urchins, who persistently sought every opportunity of being trampled under foot by the crowd; while over all, at no distant intervals, towered the pliant necks and patient heads of meek-eyed camels, looking sleepily down on the confusion, in calm tolerant contempt, like that of their swarthy riders, for those who dwelt in cities, earning bread by the bustle and competition of sedentary occupation rather than by long adventurous journeys or the vicissitudes of robbery and war.

These were invariably objects of undisguised in-

terest to the bystanders ; for about man and beast hung a smack of the boundless desert, the wild free air, the untrodden measureless waste, as from the dress and bearing of the mariner seems to exhale a flavour of his adopted element, a breath from the salt breezes of the sea.

They were mostly sun-burned and travel-worn, bearing traces of fatigue, hardship, and long exposure by night and day.

To a group of these, standing somewhat apart, surrounding one of their camels, which had lain calmly down, load and all, Ishtar thought well to address herself. They were apparently traders of a superior class, while something in their dress and furniture, denoting that their home was in the north, led her to believe they would offer a more liberal price for jewels than those southern merchants, who might probably have brought with them many such valuables for sale. The men, like their camels, seemed very weary ; nevertheless they entered on the business of a bargain without delay.

‘The damsel needs but look round,’ said one, ‘to see that her servants have no need of such things. We are overcome with long travel, sore hungered and athirst. What have we to do with

clasp and jewel? Your servants are faint for lack of bread. Can they comfort their hearts with gems and gold?’

‘Behold the sandals dropping from our feet,’ pursued another, ‘the halters of our camels worn to the last fibre! Bring us goats’-hair ropes, woollen raiment, or even garments of fine linen; we will buy them of you, and welcome—at a price.’

Sorely discouraged, Ishtar would have protested; but the words died on her lips, and she turned meekly away. Perhaps no amount of eloquence could have served her so well as this apparent indifference. The principal trader leaped down from his camel, and accosted her with some eagerness.

‘Be not hasty, my daughter,’ said he. ‘The foolish guest turns from a smoking platter, the wise waits till it is cool. Those who desire not to buy may be willing to sell. Will you look on the wares we have brought out of the south?—over the long trackless desert, and through the nations whose hand is ever stretched out to spoil and slay—the Amalekites, the Hivites, and the Anakim.’

Ishtar started. The mention of the last-named tribe brought the blood to her brow. She turned back, and replied,

‘Show me your wares, if you will, but I too am faint for lack of bread. If I am compelled to take this jewel out of the market unsold, I must creep hence to the city wall, turn my face to its shelter, and so lie down to die.’

There was something in her tone that vouched for her truth. He was a merciful man, though he had traded and travelled through the eastern world. Had she bargained with him, he could have found it in his heart to cozen her out of every article she possessed, and had been proud of his own acuteness the while. But this was a different question. It was like fighting an unarmed adversary, taking a prey that made no effort to resist or flee. His heart melted within him for sheer pity and good-will. Caution, however, whispered that such appeals might form the new mode of trading lately adopted in Babylon; and while he took the jewel from her hand, he only said, .

‘We have enough and to spare of such ornaments. Nevertheless, let us look, and judge for ourselves.’

His comrades, of whom there were but two, joined in the examination. From their immovable features she could not guess their opinion; but

Ishtar gathered that they meant to trade from the quiet air of depreciation assumed incontinently by each.

After scrutinising the jewel at every possible angle, so as to subject each particle of each stone to the searching test of sunlight, the last speaker, who seemed the principal personage, weighed it carefully in a pair of scales hanging at his belt, and observed,

‘One hundred shekels of silver would surely be a fair price, oh! my daughter? But we too have merchandise to sell. Will you not take fifty shekels and your choice of a breadth of silk, a piece of goodly needlework, or a wrought ornament in bronze and ivory from Tyre?’

The clasp was worth three hundred at the lowest, and he felt full of pity and loving-kindness towards the damsel, but a profession is second nature. He was a trader, and must live.

‘Your servant is in the hand of my lord,’ answered Ishtar humbly. ‘Take the jewel, I pray. Give me the fifty shekels, so that I may buy a morsel of bread, and eat before I die!’

He counted them out, well pleased. It was not often, even in careless pleasure-seeking Babylon,

that he could trade to such advantage. But the bargain now stood on a different footing. Ishtar's prompt compliance with his terms caused him to feel bound in honour to give her free choice of the various articles he had named, trusting only that she might not select the rarest and most expensive. Neither he nor his comrades would have refused her for their lives. Their probity, though loose in the extreme, was not elastic, and no temptation could have seduced them into any act they considered a breach of faith. Causing, therefore, another camel to kneel down, they proceeded to unpack its load, turning over for inspection shawls, silks, embroidery, and trinkets, more or less costly, from the workshops of Tyre, Ascalon, or other cities on the sea-coast.

Faint with watching and exhaustion, goods, camel, traders, and bystanders swam before Ishtar's eyes ; for amongst a handful of glittering ornaments she distinguished the amulet that the Great Queen had bestowed on Sarchedon, that she had last seen about her lover's neck.

With an effort of which few women would have been capable, she recalled her fleeting senses in subservience to her will, and asked calmly to examine

the trinket. It was valuable, no doubt, yet more from its exquisite finish than intrinsic worth, and she had presence of mind to appear only desirous of possessing it as a gaudy trifle with which they could have little disinclination to part.

‘I will ask my lord,’ said she, ‘to bestow on me no more than this ornament I hold in my hand. Also, if a drop be left in the water-skin, that I may wet my burning lips, for indeed I am faint and sore athirst!’

‘It is my daughter’s,’ answered the trader. ‘My camels, my goods, all I possess, are hers! The water-skin is indeed dried and shrivelled like an un-gathered grape, but here is a gourd not yet emptied, a barley-loaf still unbroken. I pray you, eat and drink, my daughter; comfort your heart, and go in peace.’

Complying eagerly with the invitation, Ishtar felt her very life returning with each mouthful she swallowed. Had it not been so, she never could have found strength for the task she had set herself to perform. Looking on that amulet, with its bird of peace following the weapon of war through the air, her whole being, her very soul, seemed to go out towards the lover from whom she had been

parted with so little likelihood that they might ever meet again.

‘O, that I had the wings of a dove!’ thought Ishtar, in the loving impotence of her desire, wishing, with other tortured spirits of every age and clime, but to burst through the invisible, impalpable wires of her cage to seek the rest that none can find—broken in heart and hopes, weary and wounded, yearning only to fly home.

And it may be that those who have followed in the slimy path of the serpent shall one day find their bitterest punishment in aimless, endless longing for the wings of the dove.

But could she have flown with all the speed of all the birds of air, it was yet indispensable to follow out the clue she had already obtained in the possession of the trinket that so lately belonged to Sarchedon. Strengthened by food, her womanly wit regained its keenness, while womanly shame bade her disclose but half the truth. It would be wise, she thought, to trust this friendly merchant; yet she dared not confide in him wholly, nor lay open to a stranger all the weakness of her heart.

‘My lord has shown favour to his servant,’ said she. ‘I desired of him a gift, and, lo, it lieth here

in my hand! I was hungered and athirst; he gave me to eat and to drink! Am I not in some sort the guest of my lord? I would fain ask him one question. All my happiness hangs on his lips. As his soul liveth, I implore my lord to tell me the truth.'

'Speak on, my daughter,' was the reply. 'There is no space for falsehood within the curtains of a tent, and he who dwells in the desert knows not how to lie.'

'This trinket,' she continued eagerly; 'you took it from its owner. It hung round his neck. He was a son of Ashur, tall and comely as a cedar of the mountain, brave as the lion, ruddy as sunset, bright as morning, and beautiful as day!'

The astute trader smiled.

'You know him,' said he, 'and you love him! It is as my daughter hath said.'

'He is my brother,' she answered, blushing crimson while she adjusted her veil. 'If aught but good hath befallen him, it were better for me that I had never been born!'

'Such a one as you have described,' answered the other, 'did indeed come into our possession by lawful barter amongst the tents of the Anakim. A

slave can have no goods to call his own, and when we discovered beneath his garment this jewel that had escaped the eyes of his spoilers, we might have taken it righteously by force. Nevertheless, the man was strong and warlike. Even in bonds, it may be that he would have done *himself* some injury, and so lessened his price. It was well that he suffered me to strip it from his neck unnoticed while he looked back upon the camp, as if he had left his very heart with the tribe.'

A thrill that, in spite of all, amounted to real happiness shot through her trembling frame.

'Can he not be redeemed?' she exclaimed, clasping her hands eagerly. 'Where is he now?'

The trader pondered.

'I too have a brother,' said he, 'and we parted at a day's march from the tents of the Anakim, as we have parted many a time, trusting to meet yet once again before we die. My course lay hither to the great city; for are not my camels laden with silks and spices and costly jewels, such as rich Babylon must have at all hazards and at any cost? I pray you, damsel, remember I am a fair trader; I ask for no greater profit than enables me to get bread for myself and forage for my beasts. Some

there be who scruple not to rob with the scales, as the Amalekite robs with the spear; but such prosper not in life, and long before their beards turn gray, their flesh is eaten by vultures and their bones whiten the plain !’

‘My lord spoke of the Assyrian,’ interrupted Ishtar. ‘Is he safe? Is he alive?’

‘That he is alive, my daughter,’ replied the merchant, ‘if care and good usage can keep the life in a valuable captive, I will answer with my head. We bought him at a remunerative price, and my brother is even less likely than myself to let one suffer damage whose welfare is of such marketable value. That he is safe with the other goods I have sufficient reason to hope. Surely they joined a caravan guarded by more than five hundred horsemen of the desert. Ere now they must have reached the pleasant confines of my home—the broad-leaved oaks, the cool green valleys, and the breezy mountains of the north.’

‘The north!’ repeated Ishtar, aghast and discomfited. ‘What! beyond Nineveh?’

‘Far beyond Nineveh,’ said the other, ‘far beyond the boundaries of the land of Shinar, where the banner of Ashur hath never been lifted, the spear of the Assyrian never dulled its point in blood—in the

land of corn and wine, pasture and fruit tree, flocks and herds, peace and plenty, the happy hill country of Armenia !'

'Sold to the Armenian for a slave !' was her answer. 'O, my lord, shall I never see him again ?'

He pitied her from his heart.

'Much may be done,' said he, 'with these three weapons, sword, bow, and spear; more yet with these, time, wisdom, patience. Add but a little gold, and who shall say that aught is impossible? My brother is one of those who, setting before them an object in the plain, turn neither to right nor left till they have reached it. The Assyrian is of fine frame and goodly stature, fit to stand on the steps of a throne. My brother hath determined he will sell him to no meaner purchaser than a king. Not all the wealth of Armenia will tempt him from his purpose, and to the king he will be sold. I have spoken.'

Then he turned away to prosecute his business with those who were waiting around for examination of his merchandise, and Ishtar found herself alone and friendless in the crowded market—alone, with a wild foolish hope in her heart, and Sarchedon's amulet in her hand.

From the time she lost sight of him, she had

never faltered one single moment in her resolution ; arduous, impossible as seemed her task, she would not relinquish it even now.

Had she needed any farther stimulant to exertion she would have found it in the reflection that he, the distinguished warrior, the ornament of a court, the flower of a host, the treasure of her own heart, was a slave !

At least she knew where he had gone ; at least there was one spot of earth on which her loving thoughts could light, like weary birds, and take their rest. But how to reach him ? how to span the cruel distance that lay between ? Gazing wistfully on the amulet in her hand, she would have bartered all her hopes here and hereafter, peace and safety, life and beauty, innocence itself, in exchange for the wings of a dove.





CHAPTER XVIII.

BOND AND FREE.

‘A HORNED owl in the twilight; a horned owl in the dark! How many horns does my owl hold up?’ A merry laugh was ringing in her ear, a soft hand was laid over her eyes, while the white fingers of its fellow twinkled before her face, and Ishtar recognised the voice of Kalmim, challenging her to one of those foolish games of guessing so popular from the earliest ages with the thoughtless children of the south.

It was something to meet a friend, and of her own sex, even though that friend was one with whom her deeper, purer nature had but little in common. Strung to their highest pitch, her feelings now gave way; and leaning on Kalmim’s shoulder, Ishtar burst into a passion of weeping that perhaps did more to calm and restore her than all the feminine consola-

tions and condolences lavished by the other, whose compassion, lying near the surface, seemed easily aroused and quickly exhausted.

A weeping girl was no unusual sight in the public places of great Babylon. Exciting neither pity nor comment, Ishtar and Kalmim withdrew unnoticed from the crowd, to stand apart in the shelter of a gigantic fountain, erected for the refreshment of her people by the Great Queen, where the younger woman soon recovered composure to answer the voluble questions of the elder.

‘Where have you been hiding, and what have you been doing, and why have we never seen you at the well, in the temple, at market, sacrifice, or on the city wall?’ said Kalmim, flirting the water about while she dipped her white hand in its marble basin. ‘Surely the days of mourning are past, and those of feasting should have begun. Why, then, in the name of Ashtaroth, do I find the fairest damsel in Babylon with her eyes unpainted, her head untired, and, my dear, a dress that looks as if it had been trodden in the dust by every beast in the market? How did you ever get it so rumpled and soiled?’

Ignoring this important consideration, Ishtar

took the other by the hand, and gazing in her face with large serious eyes, replied,

‘Kalmim, I believe you would serve me, if you could. I believe you are my friend.’

‘As far as one woman can be a friend to another,’ laughed Kalmim. ‘And that is about as far as I could fathom the great river with my bodkin. Trust me, dear, you are too comely to possess friends, either men or women. Nevertheless, you sat on my knees when you were a curly-headed child, and I—well, when I was better and happier than I am now. I would serve you if I could. By the light of Shamash, I would, though I might hate myself and you the next minute! Take me, therefore, while the good mood is on. What can I do to please my white-faced Ishtar?’

‘You have influence and power,’ was the reply. ‘He—my father used—I have heard it said that you are deep in her counsels, and high in favour with the Great Queen.’

An angry flush rose to Kalmim’s brow, and her laugh was not pleasant to hear, while she answered,

‘The Great Queen is a woman like the rest of us. I wish I had never seen her haughty face. For days together it was Kalmim here, Kalmim there; who so

quick-witted as Kalmim? whom could she trust like Kalmim? Kalmim was never to be out of her sight. I must have had a score of hands, and as many wings as Nisroch, to do half her bidding. Then, in the twinkling of an eye, lo, in the threading of a needle, all is changed, and because the Great King went to the stars or wherever he *did* go, I am to be cast aside like a frayed robe or a soiled napkin, and must see her face no more. She might have been a little fonder of him while he *was* here, I think, instead of making all this mourning now he's gone. You would suppose that in the whole land of Shinar no wife was ever left a widow before. Queen though she be, she must take her chance with the others, I trow.'

'And are you no longer in the royal service?' asked Ishtar, sadly disappointed.

'In the royal service I must ever be,' answered Kalmim, 'since I was born a bondwoman in old Nineveh, whence come the fairest of us, after all, say what they will of this great wicked town! I can no more help my bonds than my beauty, and I do not know, my pretty Ishtar, that I am more anxious to get rid of the one than the other. But it vexes me sore, and angers me too, when I think that the queen, because she sits in sackcloth and scatters

ashes on her head, should refuse to admit her faithful slave and servant, who never failed her yet, even to the outer court of the palace. If I were free, like you, my dear, I swear by Baal I would take my leave of great Babylon for good and all !’

‘Free !’ repeated the girl bitterly, reflecting how little availed her freedom, her birth, even her beauty to attain the one object of her life, in the pursuit of which she was fain to implore the assistance of this bondwoman. ‘If I were *free*, as you say, I would leap on yonder camel, with a lump of dates and a barley-cake in my hand, turn his head for the northern mountains, and never wish to see the city walls again.’

‘I guessed it !’ exclaimed Kalmim, clapping her hands. ‘The daughter of the stars has gone the way of us poor children of earth, as if she too were made of common clay. He has taken your heart with him, whoever he is. I see it all, and follow him you must, at any labour and at any cost. I can feel for you, dear ; I know what it is. Now, there was Sethos, the Great King’s cup-bearer, as goodly a youth as ever longed for a beard. And, lo, he vanishes one summer’s morning with a score of horsemen, rides away into the desert, and I shall never see him more.’

‘Take comfort,’ rejoined Ishtar, glad to do a kindness even for this flighty dame. ‘I left him safe and well at Ascalon, and beheld him with my own eyes drinking wine of Eshcol the night before I fled.’

‘At Ascalon!’ exclaimed Kalmim. ‘Where Rekamat was—I heard them say so! The treacherous tiger-cat! The false villain! See what it is to let a man find out you have thought twice about him. He cares no more for you than we do for a garment worn a score of times, or a husband we have known a score of years. And yet he swore and protested. Well, I was born under Ashtaroth, and I have been a fool like many another. Nevertheless, the broken jar will mend no doubt, and the empty gourd can be filled again at the stream.’

‘I think he came not into Ascalon of his own free will,’ answered Ishtar. ‘He galloped through the gate like one who rides for life, with a cloud of Egyptian horsemen at his heels.’

‘I wish with all my heart they had caught and flayed him alive!’ laughed the other. ‘But I might have known him better than to think he would look at that cream-faced Rekamat, for all her delicate gait and her tawny hair. So he escaped with the skin of

his teeth, say you, and was last seen safe in Ascalon. I pray you, is he there now ?

‘ I know not,’ answered Ishtar. ‘ O Kalmim, I will trust you. I am so miserable ; he entered the city with—with Sarchedon. And the walls were guarded, the watch set, because of the false Egyptian, so that a mouse could scarce creep out unnoticed. Nevertheless, we glided through the gate at sunrise, he and I, and—and, right or wrong, we fled into the wilderness.’

‘ Like a pair of pelicans !’ exclaimed the other in high glee. ‘ And so, being in the wilderness, you made yourselves a nest no doubt, and folded your wings in peace, as it had been behind the city wall !’

‘ The children of Anak surprised us sleeping,’ sobbed Ishtar, whose tears were beginning to flow afresh. ‘ They killed our dromedary, poor beast, and spoiled our goods—all that we had—a lump of bread and a handful of dates. They spared our lives in pity, but they set me down beside the Well of Palms, and they sold him into captivity. O Kalmim, comfort me, for indeed I fear I shall never see him more !’

Light-hearted and impressionable, the other was ready enough with sympathy, advice, and perhaps

assistance, up to the point at which it could inconvenience herself.

‘Take heart,’ said she; ‘the world is wide, but woman has her wits, as the bird of the air has its wings. Can you not discover where he is gone? Knowing this, surely the bow is bent, and the arrow fitted to the string. You need but let it fly.’

‘I was guided by Nisroch,’ was the tearful answer; ‘for I came hither into the market from the halls of my ruined home and the bones of my dead father. O Kalmim, I watched by them all last night, to drive the wild-dogs away.’

Again she laid her face on the other’s shoulder, and wept.

Kalmim was greatly moved.

‘I will help you,’ she protested. ‘Indeed, I will. I have friends; I have lovers—scores of them, girl; and in high places too. I will seam my face with scars, tear out my hair by handfuls, but they shall listen to my prayer. What! is my cheek sun-burned? are mine eyes grown dim? I will force my way to the queen! I will humble myself before the prince!’

‘The prince!’ interrupted Ishtar. ‘He is in Ascalon.’

‘Foolish girl!’ replied the other. ‘He is even

now coming out from the queen's palace to do justice amongst the people. Every second morning he rides forth on a white horse, with Assarac at his right hand. Grave has he grown, and severe, putting aside the wine-cup, speaking but a word at a time, and scarce suffering the people to look on his face. Ashtaroth, what a face it is! Surely he is more beautiful than dawn.'

Ishtar shuddered. To her, for all his comeliness, he was loathsome as a leper, terrible as a beast of prey.

'It is but justice I require,' said she, wringing her hands. 'Bare justice for an Assyrian-born carried into captivity.'

'He shall be brought back by the sons of Ashur with the strong hand,' replied Kalmim stoutly. 'Who can stand against Assyria in her might? But I know not yet whither they have taken him, nor how you have discovered the prison-house where he is lodged.'

'I came into the market at sunrise,' answered Ishtar, 'to sell the clasp of my father's girdle, that I might eat a morsel of bread. Ashtaroth must have had pity on me; for she directed my steps to those very traders who bought Sarchedon from the sons of

Anak. One, who seemed chief among them, spoke me fair, and treated me well. Perhaps he has a daughter of his own. From him I learned, that when they divided the spoil, his brother had taken the Assyrian warrior for his share, and was journeying with him to Armenia, where he would sell him for a goodly slave to stand before the king. I pray you, Kalmim, is it very far to Armenia?’

‘It is many days’ journey,’ replied Kalmim hopefully. ‘But those who have horses and camels need not the wings of a bird. I have heard it said of the Great King, that his sceptre stretched over the whole land of Shinar, his spear to the uttermost ends of the earth, and his arrows reached the heavens. I know not; but I think the sons of Ashur can obtain what they want, even from beyond the mountains of Armenia, if they go to ask for it with bow and spear. These traders, though, are soft and smooth-spoken, false as prosperous lovers, every man of them! How know you their tale is true?’

‘By this token,’ answered Ishtar, showing Sarchedon’s amulet in her hand.

Kalmim recognised it at once. Many a time since she missed it from the Great Queen’s neck had she speculated on its absence, and wondered what fresh

combinations of intrigue and duplicity were denoted by this imprudent generosity of her mistress. Though Semiramis, she knew, entertained a peculiar reverence for the trinket, as possessing some supernatural charm, yet when she bade her tirewoman go back to search for it in the temple of Baal, there was a restless anxiety in her demeanour not to be explained by mere concern for a lost jewel. And now her eyes were opened. She marvelled how she could have been so dull and blind. She resolved to hold the clue tight, and never let it go till she had turned its possession to her own advantage. Though she tried to look innocent and unconscious, it was impossible to keep down the sparkle in her eye, the crimson on her cheek, while she asked as carelessly as she could,

‘Is it a sign between you, and did he send it to vouch for the truth of the messenger?’

‘Not so,’ answered Ishtar. ‘They took it from his neck by stealth, and the good trader gave it into my hand, because I desired it of him as a gift. When I look on it, I seem to see the noble face of my beloved. O Kalmim, we must deliver him, and bring him back.’

‘We must deliver him, and bring him back,’ repeated Kalmim, pondering deeply. In a few seconds

she ran through the main points and bearings of the case.

So long as Sarchedon remained a captive in Armenia, it was obvious that he could be of little service to her designs, but if she could by any means recall him to Babylon, a path seemed open that should lead to her own aggrandisement and paramount influence in the palace. She was sufficiently persuaded that the seclusion of Semiramis would last but for a short time; that her masculine intellect would soon weary of inactivity; and that her energies would again rule the nation through the son, as heretofore through the sire. She was shrewd enough to have observed that Ninys did nothing without the counsel of Assarac; and she had not forgotten Assarac's implicit and slavish devotion to the queen. She was also satisfied that her royal lady had contracted one of those infatuated passions for Sarchedon to which she was occasionally subject, and which her tirewoman's experience reminded her would be gratified at any cost of danger or shame. If, then, she could go to the queen when the days of mourning had expired, and say to her, 'I have got your treasure safe in Babylon, under lock and key; I brought him back from Armenia by my own exertions, and

you need but lift up your finger to behold him here at your feet,' would she not become one of the greatest personages in Assyria, herself the fount of honour, wealth, influence, and promotion? Sethos, she decided, should obtain the leadership of the royal guard, and her other lovers be rewarded, more or less, in proportion to their attractions. Meantime Sarchedon must be brought back.

'You love him dearly then,' said she, 'and would shrink from no sacrifice to insure his safety?'

There was more than devotion in Ishtar's simple answer,

'I would give my life for the life of him.'

'There is but one power under that of Ashtaroth to help you at your need,' pursued Kalmim. 'If the king will send an embassy to Armenia, as to Egypt, for the recovery of Sarchedon, the youth may yet return, fast as camels can travel. But you must make your petition at once, and in person. You are young and comely, though a little too pale. Such faces as yours seldom plead with Ninyas in vain.'

Ishtar clasped her hands and trembled.

'Is there no other way?' said she. 'There is none in all the land of Shinar before whom I would not rather bow down my face than the prince.'

‘The prince, girl! what mean you?’ exclaimed the other. ‘Are you mad? There is none can help you in such a matter but the king.’

‘Only—only,’ stammered Ishtar, ‘I fled on purpose to avoid him.’

‘Fled!’ repeated Kalmim scornfully; ‘whence and why? There is no time to lose. Tell me in a word: has Ninyas, too, taken a fancy to that white face of yours?’

That white face turned crimson, while about brow and lip gathered such haughty defiance, that for a moment the girl looked like her father when he set the battle in array.

‘He would have forced me to love him,’ said she; ‘but I had rather be lying dead without the city wall!’

‘Is it so indeed?’ exclaimed Kalmim, a little vexed, it may be, to hear of another woman’s conquest, yet highly pleased with the promise of success it seemed to offer. ‘Then Ashtaroth doth indeed favour us, and the prey is taken ere we spread the net. If he wooed you unsuccessfully, believe me, he is not out of your power yet. You need but ask your price, and he will pay it. That price must be the recovery of Sarchedon.’

Love and hatred were tearing at the poor girl's heart—love gained the mastery.

‘What would you have me do?’ she asked; but her voice was so changed, the other looked anxiously in her face.

‘Now you are reasonable,’ said Kalmim, after a pause, ‘and will take a friend’s advice. So shall all turn to our advantage at last. This must you do: rend that garment of yours thus, not down to the hem, but so that it falls gracefully away in two pieces, uncovering neck and shoulder. Scatter a little dust on your head—a very little—not enough to dim the lustre on your hair. Then sit you down in the gate yonder; I will show you the place. Wait till Ninyas rides by, coming from the judgment-seat. He must be leaving it ere now. When you hear the tramp of the white horse, turn not your face to right or left; but as he draws near, start up in front of him, throw back your veil, wreath your arms about his knee, pour forth your prayer, and implore your lord to do with you what he will.’

‘Be it so,’ answered Ishtar, calm and pale, like one in the grasp of death. ‘Thus shall I save you, Sarchedon my beloved! But never, never will I look in your dear face again.’



CHAPTER XIX.

IN THE GATE.

BOWED to the dust, with rent garments, drooping head, and aching heart, from which the very life seemed pressed out, Ishtar sat herself down in the gate to watch for the passing by of the king, as he rode from the place where he had been administering justice to his people since sunrise. She had not long to wait ; the trampling of hoofs soon warned her that the royal troop was approaching, and flinging back her veil, she had scarcely time to rise erect before the well-known white horse was upon her, guided by the hand that most she feared and hated in the world.

Its rider, buried in thought, proceeded at a walk, accompanied only by Assarac, the few mounted spearmen in attendance remaining several paces behind. Ninyas appeared unusually grave and preoccupied. His face was somewhat hidden by the fall of a linen tiara and the profusion of his dark silken hair, but

in his rounded symmetry of limb, his graceful gestures, and royal dignity of bearing were conspicuous those personal advantages which formed perhaps the only merit of their new ruler in the eyes of the common crowd.

Faint and forced were the cheers that greeted his approach, dark and discontented the glances that followed him as he passed on. He from whom so much was expected had turned out a failure and a disappointment. To cruelty and injustice the people of Babylon would have submitted without a murmur, but for incapacity they had little forbearance; for one who wasted neither blood nor treasure, they entertained a fierce and dangerous contempt.

Already loud regrets had been heard among the populace for the iron rule of Ninus and the warlike glories of the Great King. Already whispers, fierce and earnest in their suppression, asked when her days of mourning would be ended; and suggested that the queen should again take part in affairs of empire—should govern Babylon, her own especial city, in person. Even before the seat of judgment, murmurs to this effect were distinctly audible, and a cry of ‘Semiramis! Semiramis!’ had been caught up and reëchoed in the outskirts of the crowd. On

such occasions, the calm face of Assarac was observed to denote secret triumph and gratification, yet clouded with something of anxiety and deep earnest thought. Riding on the king's right hand, he seemed even now so engrossed in meditation, that he was the more disturbed of the two when a figure, rising, as it were, out of the earth, wound its arms round the royal knee, at the imminent risk of being trampled to death, and laid its forehead to the white horse's shoulder in an attitude of heart-broken entreaty and abasement. Merodach must have recognised her. Ishtar knew that the animal avoided touching her with its hoofs, while, in spite of skilled hand and severe bridle, it pressed its muzzle against her fair shoulder with a mute loving caress.

‘How, now!’ exclaimed the rider haughtily.—
‘What foolish damsel is this who encumbers the royal path, seeing that the sun is already high? Know you not how the people cry without ceasing for justice during the space of two hours after dawn? Stand aside, girl, lest that tender body of yours be trampled like a lily in the dust!’

Ishtar raised her tear-stained face, pale as the flower to which she had been compared, and sobbed out wildly,

‘As thy soul liveth, hear me ! Only hear me, ere thou ride on in thy might, and crush me to death beneath thy feet ! What am I that I should stand in the path of my lord the king ?’

Surely he remembered her voice. He seemed strangely disturbed, and the hand that reined Merodach shook till the bridle rang again. Turning to Assarac, he murmured in a stifled voice,

‘Bid them keep the people back, I pray you ; with point of spear if need be. I will hear what the damsel has to say.’

Then Ishtar poured forth her whole heart with an eloquence that could only have been wrung from her by his danger whom she loved better than her very life. She reminded Ninyas of his professed attachment to herself, of their flight through the desert to the south, of her unwilling thralldom, and constant resistance at Ascalon, notwithstanding his rank, his beauty, his exceeding attractions, avoiding, with womanly tact, every allusion that could hurt his self-love, and lavishing, with womanly recklessness, every expression of flattery that could impress on him the immeasurable distance between his handmaid and her lord. Then she bade him judge of her feelings by his own. What had she to live for

but the man she loved? The youth was to *her* as water in the desert, as a breath of air to one bricked up in a dungeon. She was sick for his comely face. She made her prayer to the king, because she had been taught from childhood he was the representative of Baal in the land of Shinar, the embodiment of truth, justice, and mercy amongst his people. She knelt to him as to Nisroch with the eagle-head. She presumed not to stand before his face without a gift. Let her find favour in his sight. It was the only jewel she had left. Let him take it. Let him but grant her petition, rescue this goodly youth from captivity, and take herself—her life—all she had to give!

In accordance with ancient custom forbidding the suppliant to enter the presence of a superior without an offering, she thrust into the king's hand that amulet of emerald which had already changed owners so many times. Even at her extremity of need she could not help remarking how white and delicate were those royal fingers that trembled round the jewel, how fair and shapely was the arm that shook with some inward conflict of passions, terrible in their struggle against the strength that kept them down. It was marvellous to her that jealousy should

have such power over the male nature, and if Ninyas cared so very dearly for her, surely she ought to pity him, she thought, even though she could not love ! All this undercurrent of feeling and reflection passed through her mind while she watched every turn and gesture of her lord with the eager eyes of one who balances between life and death.

The royal face was hidden by its tiara ; the royal voice came low and husky with its haughty question,

‘ Is it a lover, girl, for whom you make this bold petition ? Did he buy you with a trinket and cast you aside in the desert, and will nothing force him back to your arms save a decree of the king ? Go to ! You seem over-shameless for a maiden,—over-tender for a wife. I have spoken.’

She was on her knees again, pressing the rider’s garment to her forehead.

‘ By the glory of Shamash !’ she exclaimed—‘ by the might of Ashur !—by the blood of Nisroch ! I am a true woman. May my lips wither, may my tongue drop out, may my heart be consumed to ashes, if I conceive a falsehood in the face of my lord the king ! His servant loves the youth—loves him so dearly, that for his sake she would accept death with joy, life-long bondage with gratitude—that to

insure his safety she would give her hopes, her heart, her all, and consent never, never to see him again !'

The king was certainly changed. Looking wildly up in that comely face, it was colder, paler than before, and the lips turned very white while they asked in a low stern voice,

'How came you by this amulet? Speak the truth, girl, lest even now your eyes be covered and your body flung from the wall. Was it given you by—by this faithless lover of yours?'

'Not so, my lord,' answered Ishtar eagerly. 'As your servant liveth, it was round his neck when they bore him into captivity, and but that I had come to the market at sunrise to eat bread, I should never have known where they had taken him. I saw the jewel in the wares of an honest merchant, and I learned from him all that my heart desired to know.'

Ninyas smiled as if well pleased, and spoke in a softer voice.

'Let him be brought to the palace at once,' said the king, turning to Assarac. 'An honest merchant ought to be easily distinguished in the market-place of Babylon. I should like to see him, girl, and I should like also to learn whither they have dared to

carry this Assyrian-born. How called you him? Sarchedon, was it not ?

‘ Surely my lord is wiser than Nebo,’ answered the girl, ‘ to know good from evil. It is even as he hath said. Behold, the king discovered it before my tongue could form the name that was in my heart.’

The rider’s hand gave such an involuntary wrench to the bridle, as caused Merodach to rear straight-on-end in resentment and surprise. Caressing the horse, and laughing lightly the while, Ninyas continued to question his suppliant :

‘ They have carried this free-born son of Ashur into captivity. It seems they have more courage than wisdom. And whither have they taken him ?’

‘ Far beyond the northern mountains,’ answered Ishtar, ‘ into the land of Armenia ; and for that he is so comely of face and noble of stature, they will be loth to yield him back, for he is to stand in goodly raiment at the right hand of the king.’

‘ Hear her, Assarac !’ exclaimed Ninyas, turning to the eunuch, with flushed brow and sparkling eyes. ‘ This comes of unstrung bows and peaceful counsels, the way of the serpent on the rock rather than of the lion by the water-spring, or the eagle in the sky. Go to ! Are the spears of Ashur bulrushes by the

river-side? Are his horses ham-strung? Hath the arm of his might dwindled to the lily hand of a maiden? I tell you, that for every furlong they have taken their captive beyond the bounds of Shinar, I will send chariots of iron and mailed horsemen a league into the land of Armenia to burn, ravage, and destroy, to bring away their gods and lead their men and maidens into captivity! Nay, if so much as a hair of Sarchedon's head shall have fallen, I will sow their country with salt, and blot out its very name from among nations! Damsel, depart in peace; your petition is granted. I have spoken.'

Exulting in her success, yet even more bewildered than rejoiced by the good fortune that had gained her object without sacrifice of personal freedom, Ishtar lost no time in obeying the royal injunction. Shrouding her fair face in its veil, she wrapped her rent garments modestly about her, and glided into the thickest of the crowd. Her escape was for a moment unnoticed, while the king gazed thoughtfully on the amulet she had left for a gift; but looking quickly up, as if about to give some directions to Assarac, the attention of each was arrested by tumultuous shouting at the adjoining gate, repeated in a thousand echoes of a thousand voices along the city wall.

It seemed that both were prepared for disaffection and disturbance among the populace. They exchanged meaning looks, and Assarac whispered in the royal ear,

‘There are twenty bands of spearmen massed behind the rampart; priests and prophets are scattered in the market-places and squares of the city; chariots of iron are harnessed in scores, and horsemen by thousands wait but the holding up of my hand to mount. I pray you give the word, and ere the sun go down, Baal shall exterminate, root and branch, all who question the authority of—of my lord the king.’

Looking on the royal personage he addressed, the eunuch’s eyes blazed with an admiration that seemed almost too warm for reverence, too passionate for loyalty. At the sound of tumult, the signal-note of conflict, Ninyas started into life with as much fire and energy as Merodach himself. The folds of the tiara fell back, disclosing those matchless features, that radiant face, glowing with just such pleasurable excitement as brightens the aspect of an ardent hunter when he sights the deer. That supple stately form, springing into graceful energy of attitude and gesture, seemed an embodiment of beauty

in warlike harness. How could such softness and delicacy be endowed with such resistless might? Surely horse and rider, thought Assarac, formed a pair unequalled the wide world through.

‘Keep the men of war back!’ exclaimed Ninyas gleefully. ‘Never take your eye off my right hand. When I raise it thus, let the spears open out by wings, unmask the archers, and bid them bend their bows.’

‘You will return to the palace!’ exclaimed Assarac. ‘You will not risk that precious life in a city tumult! By the light of Ashtaroth, by the blood of Nisroch, by the safety of the empire, by all you hold most sacred, I entreat you to keep out of danger!’

His voice was broken with real emotion, his features worked convulsively, as if he pleaded for something dearer than life; but a ringing laugh was the only answer to his appeal, and the anxious eunuch could but press on at a gallop to keep near the white horse and its rider, as they made for the great gate of Babylon that looked towards the south.



CHAPTER XX.

UNVEILED.

LIKE a swan cleaving the waters, Merodach forced his way through the ebb and flow of an eager crowd, even dangerous in the impatience with which it surged to one common centre, where two figures, dusty and travel-worn, as though arriving from a journey, sat patiently on their drooping horses to receive with exceeding calmness the cheers and congratulations lavished by the populace. One of these was in female attire, and enough of the veil and mantle were thrown aside to disclose a beautiful face, recognised with wild enthusiasm by the people of Babylon for that of the Great Queen. Shouts of welcome, acclamations denoting a transport of loyalty and affection, rose on all sides. ‘Semiramis! Semiramis!’ was the ceaseless burden of many thousand voices; while the lowest and dirtiest of the excited multitude demanded

angrily the repeal of that law which forbade a woman to reign over the sons of Ashur, insisting that their queen should be invested with supreme authority in this her especial city, the work of her hands, proposing that she should ride at once to the palace, on a pavement composed of their own necks and shoulders, many of them proceeding to fling themselves on their faces with that object forthwith.

So flattering a reception seemed, however, to raise no corresponding gratitude in the person to whom it was offered. The beautiful face wore only an expression of malicious amusement, mingled with somewhat scornful surprise ; while the other horseman, riding in close attendance, looked strangely troubled, whispering doubt and apprehension in the ear of his more composed, if more contemptuous, companion.

Sethos—for it was no other than the Great King's cup-bearer who thus found himself in a situation of extreme perplexity—on his arrival in Babylon felt indeed at his wits' end. When he obeyed the summons of his young lord, to ride with him through the desert, day and night, till they reached the great city, which Ninyas, for reasons of his own, proposed to enter in female disguise, he bade farewell to the grim towers of Ascalon with a light heart, looking on the

expedition, though it necessitated more bodily exertion than he loved, as one of intrigue, mirth, and amusement, especially at the end. The little he could gather from Ninyas during their journey failed to prepare him for such a reception as awaited them; and indeed the young king toyed, trifled, and galloped through all these leagues of burning sand as if life had nothing more serious to offer than the jest of leaving his tired attendants, one by one, in the wilderness, and riding his own good horse mercilessly to the point of death.

It had ever been the nature of Ninyas to appear lightest of heart when most he saw cause for vexation or anxiety; nor, indeed, was it without good reason that he quitted his retirement to look after his inheritance in person, and made an effort to retain the sceptre, which he first learned was his own at the moment it seemed so mysteriously to be slipping from his grasp.

His conversation with Sethos had been the earliest communication he received of his father's departure to the stars; it filled him with wonder and alarm. Subsequent explanations and comments of the cup-bearer served only to increase his bewilderment. But for the audacity of such a proceeding, he would

have felt satisfied that another had personated him in order to rob him of his crown.

It perplexed him, too, that he should have received no tidings from the mother to whom he was accustomed to fly in all his difficulties, feeling, perhaps, no little concern for her safety as well as for his own succession.

The escape of Ishtar also angered him to the core, while of Rekamat he was wearied, even to disgust. He resolved, therefore, on returning without delay to Babylon, there to examine for himself the opposition with which he had to contend, adopting the attire of a woman, as most likely thus to avoid recognition, while he prosecuted his inquiries and ascertained the nature of a conspiracy that must have been organised for his destruction.

It seemed, therefore, inconvenient and untoward in the last degree to find himself the object of such an ovation as now greeted him, denoting enthusiastic attachment, not for himself, but for the mother to whom he bore so close a resemblance. He felt his position more embarrassing than ever, when it dawned on him that in his own capital his own people mistook him for the queen. A score of times he strove to address them, and a score of times his voice was

drowned in the deafening acclamations that arose the moment he opened his lips.

His patience was failing fast, and an angry light already glittered in his eyes, when the whole expression of his face changed to one of extreme consternation and dismay. Dashing up at a gallop, and halting within two strides, sat a figure on a white horse, so like himself in his ordinary royal attire, that for a space in which a man might have counted a hundred, his senses deserted him, and, speechless from sheer amazement, he could but gaze with dilated eyes, like one horror-stricken at some vision from another world. The face, the form, the scarlet robe, the princely tiara, the golden collar, the jewelled sword, the very trappings of the horse, were all his own; and in the gesture with which that figure suddenly drew rein to station itself motionless over against him, he seemed to see *himself*, not in the foolish disguise he had lately assumed, but as it had been his custom to ride through the streets of Babylon, the darling of the Assyrian people, the flower of young heroes, the fairest of young princes, in the eastern world.

Brief as was the interval during which his presence of mind forsook him, it was long enough to

permit one of those rapid strokes by which, in love, war, and policy, bold spirits gain the mastery ; the other Ninyas had also paused for a moment, as if confused and uncertain how to act, but Assarac, pressing to the white horse's side, whispered a few earnest words in its rider's ear—words that brought a flash of energy and intelligence into the beautiful face of his listener, ere the eunuch turned in the saddle to impress some hasty directions on a captain of ten thousand, who was in attendance at his back.

Meantime the multitude shouted louder than ever, crowding, as they believed, in eager homage about their queen, unconscious of the pressure caused by a ring of spearmen circling gradually round Sethos and the veiled figure at his side.

Mingled, however, with the protestations of loyalty and affection lavished on Semiramis, rose many a seditious outcry, many an angry burst of impatience and contempt against the name of Ninyas. As the spearmen encompassed the new-comers, there was much increase of ill-humour amongst the multitude, thus wedged together by a band of iron that compressed them from without—women shrieked and fainted—children were trampled under foot—strong men, reeling and swaying to and fro, cursed audibly,

directing savage scowls and fierce abuse at the rider of the white horse, as though their ruler were answerable even for the excesses of a disorderly crowd. The storm increased, the human waves surged, swelled, and roared, everything indicated a tumult, and still the serried ranks of spearmen narrowed their circle, drawing closer and closer round the little knot of figures on which all eyes were fixed.

‘Never had man or woman such a chance!’ whispered Assarac. ‘By the body of Ashur, his sceptre has come down from the stars into your very hand. It is but to close your fingers, and you grasp it once for all!’

The rider of the white horse replied by a look of intelligence in the eunuch’s face, and a gesture of supreme contempt for the noisy multitude.

Assarac’s eyes answered with a gaze of devoted and passionate adoration.

‘Opportunity,’ he murmured, ‘is the harvest of the gods!’ But the sentiment seemed lost on the ear to which it was addressed; for the fiery white horse, obeying hand and heel, began to plunge with such formidable energy as soon cleared a breathing-space, so to speak, in the receding crowd.

And now the roll of chariots was heard without

the gate, while a score of trumpets answered each other in swelling notes of war from all quarters of the city. Men knew that for every trumpet rode a thousand of Assyria's terrible horsemen, armed with bow and spear.

It was well, thought Sethos, for his lord and himself, that they were so safely guarded. Stalwart warriors, massed ten deep, kept the people off on every side; but with thunder of wheels and bray of clarions, a certain panic took possession of the crowd, and it closed in so heavily on the plunging Merodach that, active as was the animal, it seemed in danger of being swept off its feet. Had they once gone down, neither horse nor rider would ever have risen again.

Assarac exerted all his strength and all his courage to keep in close attendance. On his face was graven the set expression of one who elects rather to die than fail in his desire; and under that storm of howls, and threats, and bitter execrations, the eunuch bore himself like a man.

An ever-increasing pressure in the crowd had now forced the white horse against the surface of the city wall, which sloped upwards from within at such an angle as permitted a nimble bowman to surmount the incline, and reach a narrow platform, whence under

cover of the rampart he could discharge his missiles in safety against an enemy. It was very steep, and afforded a foothold slippery and insecure to the last degree.

Measuring it in one rapid glance, his rider's hand and heel roused Merodach's courage to the utmost for his effort. With a bound like a wild-deer, a shower of sun-baked clay, a hideous moment of poise, struggle, and recovery, the white horse bore his rider to this point of vantage and security, standing there motionless, save for a quick vibration of his ears, a prolonged snort, expressing triumph, defiance, and a sense of danger past.

Throned in their recess, the pair seemed rather to have come down from the gods than gone up from amongst men.

Such a feat, with such a people, could not but produce an irresistible effect. Voices raised a little earlier in scorn and hatred now shouted enthusiastic admiration and approval. One such display of skill in horsemanship seemed enough to regain for their reckless ruler all the popularity that had been withdrawn.

Every eye was now riveted on the white horse and its rider. At a signal that the latter desired to speak,

unbroken silence fell on those assembled thousands, and not an accent was lost of that sweet measured voice, clear, full, and musical in the cadence of its every tone.

‘Sons of Ashur,’ it said, ‘men of Babylon, conquerors of the world, ye love the line of Nimrod dearly, but ye love not *me*! Tell me not ye have changed in one brief moment, because of a bold leap and a willing steed. I am unworthy to reign over you. I have been weighed, and found wanting. I have tried, and failed. Baal in his temple has warned me to abandon the reins I possess neither power nor wit to guide. I have seen your reception of Semiramis. I know—none better—the worth and wisdom of the Great Queen. Sons of Ashur, in her favour I abdicate; to her hand I resign my sceptre, at her feet I lay my crown. May the queen live for ever! I have spoken. And now stand aside, sons of Ashur, while I come down, lest I hurt a hair of the head of one of her especial people, whom she will rule with a mother’s love, whom she will lead to triumphs beside which the glory of Ninus himself shall pale and fade away!’

With these words, Merodach was urged to the downward leap. A column of spearmen cleared a

passage through the crowd, and the brave white horse, followed by the eyes of all Babylon, galloped off at speed towards the palace of the Great Queen.

When men turned to look for her, marvelling at her strange appearance among them weary and travel-worn out of the desert, lo, she too had vanished with her attendant, guarded, it was said, by hosts of archers, clouds of horsemen who thronged about her so thick and close, that none might look on the royal person, nor come within hearing of the royal voice.

Nevertheless, each went to his home with a pleasing prospect of coming rejoicings, of war and triumph, feast and revel, harp, timbrel, and beat of dancing feet, splendour in the palace, plenty in the suburb, jovial days and merry nights throughout great Babylon once more.

END OF VOL. II.

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